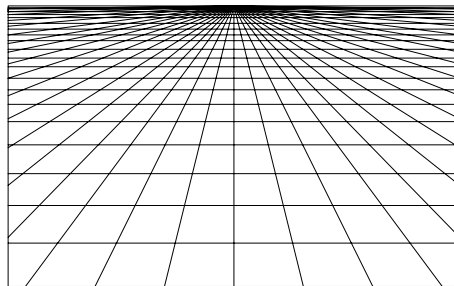




UNIVERSITY OF OSLO  
FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

**TIK**

*Centre for technology, innovation and culture*  
*P.O. BOX 1108 Blindern*  
*N-0317 OSLO*  
Norway  
<http://www.tik.uio.no>



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## ***Blogging Iran – A Case Study of Iranian English Language Weblogs***

Peder Are Nøstvold Jensen  
University of Oslo  
Nature and Culture  
2004

24.819 Words

Supervisor for this Master thesis has been Professor Terje Rasmussen from the Department of Media and Communication, the University of Oslo, Norway.

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Last, but not least, I have to thank Mr. Hossein Derakhshan for spending some of his time giving me information and granting me an interview. Without him, and the other Iranian bloggers described here, this Master thesis would not have been possible.

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## **1. Motivation**

When working on formulating the subject for this thesis, I was motivated to write something about New Media and the Middle East, especially about the Internet, as this has been paid little attention so far, in my view. My personal interest in this theme stems from my background in Middle Eastern studies, where I have studied Arabic language as well as the history of the Middle East. Working and living in the region for several years, I have myself witnessed how New Media are changing the information landscape in the Middle East. Most of the focus has so far been on Satellite TV channels such as the Arabic Al-Jazeera. This is probably justified, given that TV still reaches a much broader audience in these countries than the Internet does. However, the Internet is growing in importance, and has perhaps not been researched as much so far.

Iran, with one of the most active democratic opposition movements in the Middle East and a large diaspora of Iranians in the West, combined with a control of cyberspace that may or may not be less strict than Far Eastern nations, seemed to be a good case to study. From my background, I know Iran less well than I know the Arab world. However, being an "outsider" can also increase the possibility of having sufficient distance to the object of study.

## **2. Methodology**

I was faced with the dilemma of whether I should do a single case study of one country only, such as Iran, or do a comparison between several cases. A single case study gives greater opportunity to go deeper into the material than a comparative analysis would allow. Given the short time span at my disposal in the extremely intensive ESST Master program, it also seemed like the more logical choice to focus on one nation only. However, I found that there is little literature available about Internet censorship in Iran and the Middle East. The Internet hit the mainstream in the second half of the 1990s, so the field of research itself is new. The few thorough studies made about countries with some degree of Internet censorship tend to focus on nations in East or South East Asia, such as China or Singapore. In order to assess how extensive censorship is in Iran, or how much it is technically possible to censor the Internet, it is necessary, or at least highly useful, first to briefly describe the situation in other countries. Although the main focus of this thesis will indeed be on Iran, the experiences and

examples from a handful of other nations, especially China, Singapore and Burma, will be used to illuminate the case of Iran. I will then do a brief description of the political situation in Iran, and explain why there is a degree of censorship in the first place.

Iran in particular is an intriguing case to study. Since the birth of the Islamic Republic 25 years ago, when Khomeini seized power, there has been growing disillusionment in parts of the population on behalf of the Islamic Republic and its ideals. There has been a much-publicized power struggle between what has been deemed "Reformist elements" under the leadership of President Khatami, and more conservative "Hardliners". The Islamic Republic of Iran has a complex structure, where power is divided between the President, the so-called Guardian Council, the Parliament, the Judiciary and several other power centers, where Hardliners and Reformists can have varying influence. The final word is the hands of the unelected Supreme Leader, and Ayatollah Khomeini's successor, Ali Khamenei.

This complicated and prolonged struggle over defining what kind of state Iran is, or should be, has produced a large and active democratic opposition movement, or perhaps one should say movements, as they do not always share the same goals. Some want to restore the Monarchy, others want to have a more genuinely democratic Republic. Most of these different groups do share a common opposition to the Hardliners in control now, and wish for genuine democracy and a more secular state. Even the popularity of so-called Reformist President Khatami has been waning.

At the same time, Iran and many Islamic and Middle Eastern countries have until now been estimated or thought to have somewhat less strict censorship of the Internet than some East Asian nations such as China. The view of the Internet, by many applauded as an international champion of Free Speech in the 1990s, has shifted a bit towards a more pessimistic – some would say realistic – outlook. As nations such as Singapore and China have sought to control the Internet use of their citizens more, and even Western countries after the terror attacks in the USA 11<sup>th</sup> of September 2001 have become more sensitive towards preventing terrorism, some observers have started viewing the Internet in a more balanced way, or even as a tool for increased surveillance and decreased privacy. Of course, one should always be careful to avoid simplistic Technological determinism. "Technological determinism" (Bijker 2001, Shields 1997, Wyatt 1998) has been explained as the idea that technological development can be accurately predicted, since it unfolds independently from social, cultural and various non-material factors (Shields 1997). Another, in many ways opposing idea, is that of reductionism or value-neutrality (Titles & Oberdiek 1995, Wyatt 1998), the thought that technologies are only assembled materials and that use alone determines their potential. STS-theory, taught at the ESST Master program, seeks to bring technology together with the wider context of society. Results and effects are also about skills and education, as well as the value-systems of the users, not just the technology itself. (Titles & Oberdiek 1995, de Wilde 2000).

Due to the time and resource constraints of the thesis, it was necessary to limit the scope of the original research question and formulate issues for further empirical work. Chances of doing a close-up, detailed observation of the real world are limited. I have attempted to make the choice of objects for study in accordance with Stake's criteria for case selection, "selecting a case of some typicality, but leaning towards those cases that seem to offer opportunity to learn" (Yin 1994, p. 243), and to select "that case from which we feel we can learn the most". (ibid.) Dynamic websites with a certain frequency of updates, such as weblogs, seemed to be a good choice. This thesis is more of a descriptive and exploratory kind than an explanatory one, and consists of empirical material plus literature. Document

analysis has been defined as the method of systematically analyzing written productions that are not generated by the researcher. According to Syvertsen (1998), document analysis is a part of almost all media research, but especially important within certain fields such as analysis of media policies, like regulation and implementation. One possible problem with document analysis is the potential over-reliance on case study research. (Yin 1994: 82) I have sought to supplement my case studies with observations and reports done by reliable organizations and individuals, if these have been available. Since document analysis of such a fluid medium as the Internet can be challenging, I have attempted to include dates when referring to specific postings or articles published on the weblogs in question, as online documents are ever-changing.

When selecting the background literature for this Master thesis, I have used different methods. By utilizing the search engines Google, Yahoo! and AltaVista, I managed to find some relevant newspaper and magazine articles about Internet censorship, both in Iran and elsewhere. I discovered that these competing search engines do sometimes give slightly different results when typing in the same key words, like “Iran”, “censorship” and “weblogs”. Which means that when doing research, it is advisable to make use of more than just one search engine, like Google.

Searching the Internet, and companies such as Amazon.com, made me come up with several relevant books, for instance: *Open Networks, Closed Regimes: The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule* by Shanthi Kalathil, *Democracy and the Internet: Allies or Adversaries?* by Leslie David Simon, *You've Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijings' Strategies* by Michael S. Chase, *China's digital dream - The impact of the Internet on Chinese society, 2nd revised* by Junhua Zhang and *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* by Dale F. Eickelman. Other books have been obtained through bookshops at the University of Oslo, such as *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business, and Society* by Manuel Castells and *The Future of Ideas : The Fate of the Commons in a Connected world* by Lawrence Lessig. Finally, I have used the libraries both at the TIK Centre and elsewhere to look for related articles or books. *Oil in the Gulf. Obstacles to Democracy and Development* by Daniel Heradstveit and Helge Hveem, where one of the chapters deals with the Iranian democracy movement, was found by consulting NUPI, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs. To summarize, the background literature has been selected by using a combination of Internet searches and other sources. The main focus of the searches has been on the theme of “Internet censorship”, but also on “Iran and democracy” as well as “Internet sociology” and the Internet as a medium. One book about weblogs has been included, *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture* by Rebecca Blood, but most of the literature regarding weblogs has been obtained through the Internet.

I have several handicaps restricting my options when writing this Master thesis. The most important one is that I do not speak Persian, the national language of Iran. This automatically narrows the possible research candidates down to the minority of Iranian websites that are either in English, or at least bilingual, English and Persian.

The second limitation is that the issue itself is politically sensitive. Even if I had the time and resources at hand to go to Iran to do field research there, which I sadly did not, it would be difficult or even dangerous to do this in any practical way. Because of the political power struggle going on inside Iran, and the potentially severe repercussions involved for persons who could for some reason be deemed critical of the regime, doing this study within Iran itself

is a difficult option. Opposition activities are restricted through laws and practices, and it is hard to conduct direct research about illegal activities. Critical journalists are sometimes jailed, and may be mistreated. This has even been reported to happen with a few foreign citizens visiting Iran.

The third possibility would be to use Iranians in exile in Western nations. This could indeed be an interesting option, and has been done by others before. Marika Luders submitted her thesis "Online Relations – A case study exploring the social, cultural and political value of the Internet for exile-Burmese" to the Department of Media and Communication, University of Oslo, in 2001. The empirical basis for her thesis was semi structured interviews with twelve Burmese in exile, three in Oslo and nine in London. The possibility of doing a similar study, for instance interviewing Iranians living in Oslo about their relationship and use of the Internet to keep in touch with relatives and friends inside Iran, did appeal to me. However, I had the initial wish to do research on some of the websites themselves, as I was already familiar with many of them. Due to the time restraints in my thesis program, I had to make a choice. I have chosen to put the main emphasis on the websites themselves, in this case English language weblogs. I did make the compromise, however, of including one interview with a high-profile Iranian in exile, to compensate for some of the lack of literature available about Internet censorship in Iran.

The reason why I have decided to focus on weblogs is because they represent a special type of websites. Weblogs are personal websites, rather than more "impersonal", traditional forms of websites. As they are usually updated with some frequency, it is easier to track patterns of information streams here than on more "static" forms of websites, such as the home pages of Iranian Human Rights organizations that usually don't change very much. Another possibility of more "dynamic" websites could be Internet-based discussion forums. The major obstacle here was that the number of Iranian English language discussion forums is rather small. Hardly more than a handful, of which only two or three are active and significant. I deemed the number to be too small to form the basis for any thesis about the subject of Internet censorship.

For the sake of this thesis, I have adopted the definition of a weblog developed by Dr Jill Walker, from the Dept of Humanistic Informatics, University of Bergen, Norway. I will list the full definition later, but will give a shortened one here<sup>1</sup>:

A weblog, or \*blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged so the most recent post appears first. Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal. Since anybody with an Internet connection can publish their own weblog, there is great variety in the quality, content, and ambition of weblogs, and a weblog may have anywhere from a handful to tens of thousands of daily readers. Most weblogs use links generously, allowing readers to follow conversations between weblogs by following links between entries on related topics.

The total number of Iranian weblogs is disputed, but BlogCensus<sup>2</sup> counts 64 thousand Persian language ones, making Persians the fourth largest language community of weblogs in the world. The number of bilingual or English language weblogs is obviously much smaller, perhaps about one hundred. As some blogs are "dead", that is abandoned or no longer

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<sup>1</sup> [http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog\\_theorising/final\\_version\\_of\\_weblog\\_definition.html](http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog_theorising/final_version_of_weblog_definition.html)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.blogcensus.net/?page=lang>

updated, and new ones are added all the time, it is anyway complicated to count the number. Estimates of how many Iranians are active user of the Internet range from 3,5 million to 7 million<sup>3</sup>. Even the highest of these estimates doesn't make up more than 10 per cent of the population.

I have included an interview with Mr. Hossein Derakhshan. He is an internationally recognized Iranian weblogger or "blogger", and has earlier been interviewed by the BBC and other media about the development of Iranian weblogs. He belongs to the Western diaspora of Iranians, and lives in Canada. He is a very conscious and technically capable weblogger, and participates in several projects focused on challenging censorship inside Iran.

He also keeps a list of weblogs by Iranians in English, divided into "insiders", Iranians living in Iran, and "outsider", Iranians in exile, like himself. I have consulted this list when choosing which weblogs to pay most attention to, although I have not limited myself exclusively to it. I found the distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders" highly useful. One of the most interesting questions regarding censorship, is to what extent Iranians inside the Islamic Republic can access and read weblogs by Iranians in Western countries, who benefit from Western concepts of Freedom of Speech. Do they link to external weblogs or websites? Do they make references in postings that indicate they have been able to read weblogs by outsiders? In order to assess some of these questions, I have decided to make a list evenly divided between weblogs by Insiders and weblogs by Outsiders.

20 weblogs have been singled out for special attention, 10 from Iran and 10 from outside it. This does in no way indicate that I have never visited and consulted other blogs or websites, only a recognition of the fact that it is difficult to make in-depth observations and studies of too many websites at the same time. In choosing which weblogs to receive special attention, I have used the following set of criteria:

1. The weblog must be in English, or at least bilingual, English and Persian. It must also, naturally, be of an Iranian, either inside the Islamic Republic itself or from the Western diaspora.
2. The weblog in question must at least sometimes touch political, religious or Human Rights issues. This is a vague, yet crucial criterion. The very definition of a "weblog" encompasses everything from websites with a very small readership, where the author merely publishes diary notes, to large and influential political websites, with thousands or even tens of thousands of readers every day. It does as well include so-called "photoblogs", where the blogger takes artistic pictures of his or her family, home town etc. Weblogs with diary notes about birthday parties or photos of traffic jams in Tehran can be entertaining, but they are not that relevant to a thesis focusing on Free Speech vs. censorship on the Internet. The dividing line is not clear cut, however. As weblogs are by definition personal websites, some of the ones I refer to will also contain some posts about personal activities. Overall, they do include certain comments about the socio-religious situation in the Islamic Republic that makes me define them, however vaguely, as "weblogs with a political touch".
3. The weblog must be updated with some frequency. This criterion is also not easy to assess accurately. Some weblogs are "dead", meaning that the person behind it has either grown

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<sup>3</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/3486923.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3486923.stm)



tired of the blog, lacks time to update it or for some reason neglects it. Others are very active, and are updated and have new posts on a daily or almost daily basis. Quite a few weblogs fall somewhere in between these two extremes, updated on a weekly or monthly basis, for instance. When I made the selection of 20 weblogs to receive special attention, I defined "live" blogs as being updated within the previous month or so. The fact that a weblog has been updated before is, of course, no guarantee that it will be updated in the future. This means that the frequency of updates does vary considerably between the weblogs I have chosen.

In choosing the twenty weblogs in question, I have made use of, although not exclusively based myself upon, the list provided at [blogsbyiranians.com](http://blogsbyiranians.com), a listing of weblogs in English by Iranians both inside and outside of Iran. The list is maintained by Mr. Hossein Derakhshan, a blogger and activist born in Tehran, but today living in Toronto, Canada. His own weblog, [hoder.com/weblog](http://hoder.com/weblog), has been included among my selection, as has [Stop.Censoring.Us](http://Stop.Censoring.Us), a weblog devoted to watching Internet censorship in Iran, also with the participation of Mr. Derakhshan. In addition to this, I have included an interview with Hossein Derakhshan about weblogs and Internet censorship in Iran. I realize that this can make charges of using a too biased or one-sided source material possible. However, I have taken great care never to rely on one source alone when drawing conclusions. I have included Mr. Derakhshan's comments only when these have been supported by other reliable institutes, such as the Reporters Without Borders or The OpenNet Initiative, and do not contradict my findings elsewhere. In addition to the list from [blogsbyiranians.com](http://blogsbyiranians.com), I have quite simply followed the links provided from many Iranian weblogs to explore the Iranian English "blogosphere", as the community of weblogs is sometimes called. The selection was done during the spring of 2004, mainly during April and May, according to the criteria listed previously.

The full interview with Hossein Derakhshan will be included in the Appendix section. Some pieces of information have, in accordance with the above mentioned rule, been quoted in the text of the actual thesis itself. The interview has been conducted by email. It can be rated as a semi structured interview, as many of the questions were prepared in advance, but follow-up questions have been emailed later. As you in a normal, face-to-face or even telephone interview would have the possibility to ask follow-up questions, I reserved myself the right to do so, based upon the answers I received to the pre-arranged questions.

Ideally, the thesis should have included interviews with other Iranian bloggers as well, in addition to Mr. Derakhshan. The information you receive from an interview can be colored by any potential bias of the person involved, and even by the interview situation itself, by the phenomenon known as reflexivity. Reflexivity means that the interviewee gives the responses that the interviewer wants to hear (Yin 1994:80). The risk of having a personal bias coloring your findings can be reduced by interviewing a certain number of people. Again, this was not something I had the opportunity of doing, given the limitations restricting me. On the positive side, the interview method is targeted and insightful, and can be a useful way of gathering data on precisely what you want to know. In considering this, I had to weigh the pitfalls of using the information from one interviewee against the potential of gaining more insight into the matter at hand. The interview could allow me to view the issue from different angles not covered by the case studies of weblogs or the literature available. In the end, I calculated that the opportunity to use multiple sources of evidence, or triangulation, outweighed the dangers involved. One interview with a knowledgeable informant, although risky and not to be used without caution, can still be better than no interview at all.

Of course, to do a complete survey of the topic "Iran and the Internet" is way beyond the scope of this thesis. The Internet is quite simply too vast and fluid for anybody to do that, certainly not within the time restraints put by the ESST Master program. Rather, it is a case study of a sample within a specific type of websites, English language weblogs, over a limited period of time. Weblogs only form one small segment of the whole Internet, and blogs by Iranians in English form a minority of this segment. It is risky to extrapolate any conclusions drawn from such a small percentage of the whole structure. In addition to this, it is quite possible that the censorship situation for Persian language websites, which of course form the vast majority for Iranians, is different from that of English language ones. Indeed, the limited information available does indicate that this might be the case.

Generalizing from the samples to the universe is not the goal with case studies. Nevertheless, by putting these observations into a broader context, I may attempt to infer some analytical generalizations and perhaps indicate certain trends. I hope that this Master thesis, and its study of Iranian English weblogs, can at least give some small hint about the direction of Internet censorship in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The topic itself is an important one, worthy of further study.

### **3. The Internet and censorship**

In the early days of the Internet as a mainstream medium, in the mid-1990s, there was something close to a general euphoria in some quarters over this new technology, which seemed to offer limitless amounts of information, free of censorship, available to everybody. Libertarians embraced it as a new tool against oppression and for democracy. A new tidal wave of Free Speech, sweeping away national boundaries and authoritarian control, was envisioned. Of course, enthusiasm over the prospects of new technology is hardly anything new or surprising. Neither was the eventual, more realistic correction of the earlier assessments.

Renowned Internet sociologist Manuel Castells is often seen as one of the more optimistic in his views of the Internet, a visionary. Together with several other theorists, he has argued that the Internet and its associated technologies will contribute to the demise of the nation-state as we know it. In *The Internet Galaxy: Reflections on the Internet, Business and Society*, he puts it this way:

*The Internet is a communication medium that allows, for the first time, the communication of many to many, in chosen time, on a global scale. As the diffusion of the printing press in the West created what MacLuhan named the "Gutenberg Galaxy", we have now entered a new world of communication: The Internet Galaxy.* (Castells, Page 2)

However, even Castells is not blind to the fact that cultural factors play a significant part in why the Internet was automatically viewed as a tool for freedom of speech in the first place. The Internet originated in the Western world, especially in the USA, where it was shaped by a culture that values freedom of speech and nourishes it.

*The fact that the Internet developed first in the United States meant that it came under the constitutional protection of free speech enforced by the US courts. Because the backbone of the global Internet was largely based in the United States, any restriction to servers in other countries could generally be bypassed by re-routing through a US server.”(...)In this sense the Internet decisively undermined national sovereignty and state control. But it could only do so because of the judicial protection it received in the core of its global backbone, the US: (Castells, page 169)*

In a sense, Castells thus rejects simplistic technological determinism. Technological determinism implies that technology by itself has an independent effect on society. Social change is the effect of technological development. On the other hand, an instrumental view emphasises that individuals act according to their own free will. Individuals and societies, influenced by the cultures they exist in, decide how technology will be used. Technological products themselves are neutral and can be used for different purposes. Some will maintain, as the STS-perspective does, that the reality is not an either-or situation. The relations between society and technology are quite complex. “Technological elements as resources “become” technology only through social use and interpretation, that is, in its blending with rules” (Rasmussen 1996, 170. Rasmussen, Terje Communication Technologies and the mediation of social life, Oslo IMK report #16). Just because the Internet contains the potential for the democratization of information does not mean that this is an inevitable result of the ongoing development in a given country. Even in Western countries, after the terror attacks in the USA in September 2001, there has been increased focus on the necessity of surveillance in certain situations. After studying the examples of Internet-control in nations such as Singapore, Castells concludes with a more sobering note:

*At the dawn of the twenty-first century there is an unsettling combination in the Internet world: pervasive libertarian ideology with increasingly controlling practice.(...)Global networks cannot be controlled, but people using them, can, are, and will be – unless societies opt for the freedom of the Internet by acting from and beyond the barricades of their nostalgic libertarians.(Castells, page 183-84)*

Lawrence Lessig, the author of *Code and other Laws of Cyberspace*, has sometimes been labelled as more pessimistic when it comes to freedom on the Internet. He expands his arguments in *The Future of Ideas: The Fate of the Commons in a Connected World*. Briefly speaking, Lessig is concerned that the increasing commercialization of cyberspace is eroding our privacy and liberty. Private companies need to secure information about us and our use of the Internet, to benefit from that information to make money of it. Governments around the world frequently support this subtle “surveillance”, to help them reclaim some of the control they lost in the early days of the Internet.

Lee Tien, a privacy attorney with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, thinks things have definitely gotten worse when it comes to privacy in cyberspace: “What has changed is the technology makes it easier to track people, to mine data about people. It's cheaper to analyze data. And with the cheaper technology, they can store more data” Chris Hoofnagle, deputy counsel for the Electronic Privacy Information Center, agrees: “E-mail is perhaps the most ubiquitous form of Internet use, and in many ways the most insecure. E-mail is essentially a digital version of a postcard, and there are many people who can intercept it”.<sup>4</sup>

Ben Edelman, a Ph.D. candidate at Harvard University, is a researcher that has done groundbreaking studies of Internet filtering in countries like China and Saudi Arabia. In the

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<sup>4</sup> Article from the newspaper Mercury news,  
<http://www.mercurynews.com/mld/mercurynews/business/5653230.htm>

report *Internet Under Surveillance* from the Reporters Without Borders<sup>5</sup>, he warns against increasingly sophisticated methods for Internet censorship employed by authoritarian states:

*But the past year has brought a rise of new filtering methods that, intentionally or by happenstance, are considerably more confusing. Try using Google in China : Most searches work fine, in a much-appreciated improvement over the week in September 2002 when China blocked Google in its entirety. But run a search on a controversial policy area, and Google will stop working for perhaps half an hour. What to make of these facts ? Some western analysts have wondered whether Google is conspiring with China - after all, such precise and subtle filtering interventions would seek to require Google's cooperation. But as it turns out, all indications are that Google is innocent ; China has simply implemented a method of filtering more narrowly targeted than any before.*

*Still more subtle are the "modified mirrors" sometimes used in Uzbekistan. Rather than simply blocking access to sites of political dissenters, Uzbek authorities make copies of the controversial sites - then change the copies to undermine or weaken the unsanctioned positions. The key step : When Uzbek users request the controversial sites, they automatically receive the altered copies in place of the authentic originals. Experts might realize something is wrong, but this tampering is exceptionally difficult for ordinary users to notice or detect.*

In *Open Networks, Closed Regimes – The Impact of the Internet on Authoritarian Rule*, Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas warn that technology alone cannot accomplish miracles, and that the Internet itself “has no inherent political value. It is only a tool, and its specific uses by political, economic and societal actors must be carefully weighed and considered.” They suggest that the Internet may be primarily a facilitator for pro-democracy work in other areas, rather than playing the starring role itself. The fact that authoritarian states themselves control the pace and nature of the Internet’s diffusion within their borders should not be overlooked. Based on a systematic examination of evidence from eight cases – China, Cuba, Singapore, Vietnam, Burma, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt – Kalathil and Boas conclude that the Internet is not necessarily a threat to authoritarian regimes. Some of them may even utilize the Net for their own purposes, with some success in cases such as Singapore, which will be explored later in this thesis.

Of course, some people never believed in the most excessive expectations to the Internet in the first place. Brian Winston in *Media Technology and Society: From the Telegraph to the Internet* writes that: “Beyond the hype, the Internet was just another network. This is to say its social effects could (and would) be as profound as, for example, those of the far more ubiquitous network, the telephone. As profound.....and as unrevolutionary.” (Winston, page 336). He argues that the Internet is nothing but another chapter in the long history of electronic systems of communications, starting with the telegraph in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nothing more, and nothing less:

*This book has been a history of electrical and electronic systems of communications. I have used this account to mount a case against the concept of technological determinism, arguing instead that social, political, economic and cultural factors are the prime determinants of technological change. In passing, as it were, I have also disputed the concept of an Information Revolution, taking particular issue with the rhetorical hyperbole it has engendered. Instead I have suggested that change is accomplished slowly. (Winston, page 341)*

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=10761](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10761), 2004

Not everybody shares Winston's view that the Internet is a communication tool like any other. In *Asian Cyberactivism – Freedom of Expression and Media Censorship*, edited by Steven Gan, James Gomez and Uwe Johannsen, Judith Clarke strikes a rather different note:

*The Internet represents a radical break from earlier communication technologies. It provides the opportunity for anyone with access to a computer to find huge amounts of information at will, to post feedback and, at a low cost and with just a little specialised knowledge, to set up a website themselves and become content providers as individuals or as part of a group. This surely represents the most major of all technological changes in terms of the democratising potential of the media. The amateur's website stands alongside that of the highly sophisticated commercial entity. (Gan, page 18)*

Geoff Long agrees with this assessment:

*Many would argue that the Internet is just another media or communications channel, but as we have seen it is more than that and would be better described as a key enabler and radically different from anything that has come before it. The Internet uses those other channels, whether it's a satellite link, cable TV network or home phone line, to create a decentralised series of networks that are capable of providing an unlimited number of services and applications. Unlike the telephone networks of old, there is no central point of control on the Internet. (Gan, page 90)*

Javier Corrales participates in the book *Democracy and the Internet – Allies or Adversaries?*, edited by Leslie David Simon. Corrales makes the suggestion that the Internet will have the most tangible impact in "intermediate" countries, not authoritarian ones, but neither with a fully functioning democracy. These are regimes whose political institutions are formally democratic, but seriously defective. For instance several Latin American nations: "In countries at either end of the spectrum – either highly democratic or highly undemocratic – the democratizing effects of the Internet are likely to be modest. In these countries, political institutions and avenues of participation are either too strong or too hermetically sealed to be seriously affected – one way or the other – by the rise of the new technology." (Simon, page 31)

Perhaps the most positive view of the Internet is that which is put forward by Martin Woesler in *China's Digital Dream – The Impact of the Internet on Chinese Society*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition:

*Because of the very nature of the Internet, the restrictions finally fail, and the Internet not only promotes economic development but also the maturity of the people and freedom of thought. Therefore, the Internet sooner or later serves to open up societies and turn them into "Open Societies", provocatively; one may even call them "Western-style information societies." (Woesler, page 287)*

He is challenged in this conclusion by the more cautious Michael Chase and James Mulvenon in *You've Got Dissent! Chinese Dissident Use of the Internet and Beijing's Counter-Strategies*:

*In the short to medium term, however, the multifarious close partnerships between the regime and the commercial Internet sector, institutionalized in a complex web of regulations and fiscal relationships, imply that the government will not lose the upper hand soon. (...) Thus, the Internet, despite the rhetoric of its most enthusiastic supporters, will probably not bring "revolutionary" political change to China, but instead will be a key pillar of China's slower, evolutionary path toward increased pluralization and possibly even nascent democratization. (Chase, page 90)*

This line of reasoning seems related to that of W. Lance Bennett, who claims that democratic changes are fuelled by the continuing flow of political impressions. The media play a central role in creating small openings for reforms. (Bennet, W Lance, 1998 “The media and democratic developments: The social basis of political communication”, in O’Neill, Patrick H (ed) : “Communicating democracy”. London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, pp 195)

Countries like China are famous for trying to control the Internet, and as we shall see, also perceived to be partly successful in this undertaking. In addition to this, efforts to place the Internet under global or UN control is reportedly led by China. Supporters of global governance say that the Internet should be administered and managed by a governmental body, with uniform standards for security and better access for poorer countries. Critics of the global Internet idea say certain nations like China want to curb freedom of expression.<sup>6</sup> Of course, the very fact that the Chinese government wants more international control over the Internet could also be seen as an admission that despite attempts to censor it at home, they are still concerned about possible long-term effects of it.

To sum up the arguments, there is little doubt that some of the most optimistic expectations to the Internet in the 1990s were unfounded and exaggerated. The Internet is not a magic vessel, and it does not exist in a political and cultural vacuum. Even if the Internet may seem like a tool for freedom in the West, where freedom of speech is already the norm, this does not necessarily have to be the case in other cultural and political settings. The very notion of what constitutes “freedom” can be different. The interaction between tools of technology, individuals and the societies they live in is quite complex, and may change with circumstances. Even in the West, freedom and privacy in cyberspace can be challenged. The War against Terror has renewed cries for more surveillance, and commercial interests want to harvest as much information about you as possible, to utilize for their own benefits. Some Western software companies like Yahoo! and Cisco have been reported to help the Chinese government in its censorship efforts, to gain access to the lucrative market in China. Even though the information available on the Internet cannot be controlled, the points of access to it can, to some extent, as can the individuals who use it be intimidated and discouraged from seeking it out.

However, despite the fact that the Internet’s potential for creating change may have been overrated, this does in no way indicate that it has to be negligible. Michael Chase and James Mulvenon point out the possibility that the Internet can facilitate democratization at a slower pace, which does not have to be inferior to quicker, and more dramatic changes. Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas suggest something similar, with the Internet playing a significant, but perhaps not stellar role in changing authoritarian states. Optimists like Martin Woesler claim that the Internet already *has* challenged authoritarian states, and point out the fact that even tightly controlled China now permits online access to major Western media such as the Washington Post, and even some Human Rights information. The window of opportunity the Internet provides is perhaps not as wide-open as was hoped for in the early years. But there is still enough room for change to slip through. Manuel Castells says it well: “The Internet is no longer a free realm, but neither has it fulfilled the Orwellian prophecy. It is a contested terrain, where the new, fundamental battle for freedom in the Information Age is being fought:” (Castells, page 171)

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<sup>6</sup> Fox News, December 01, 2003, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,104413,00.html>

## 4.1 Internet censorship in China

Few places have Internet libertarians met harder resistance than in China. Far from bringing democracy to the Chinese, according to this article by the Reporters Without Borders from the summer of 2004, censorship of the Internet in China is more severe than ever<sup>7</sup>:

*With a total of 61 Internet users in detention at the start of May 2004, China is the world's biggest prison for cyber-dissidents. It is also the country where the technology for e-mail interception and Internet censorship is most developed. The Chinese authorities use a clever mix of propaganda, disinformation and repression to stifle online free expression. Initial hopes that the Internet would develop into an unfettered media and help liberalize China have been dashed. What has happened in China has shattered generally accepted ideas. The Internet can indeed become a propaganda media. On its own, it will not suffice to support the emergence of democracy in any significant way. And it can be totally controlled by a government that equips itself to do so. Indeed, the way the Chinese government has sabotaged online dissent offers a model for dictatorships around the world.*

*As they are hard to monitor, cyber-café's will henceforth only be operated by a few large retail chains which are closely linked to the state and which will be forced to install standardized surveillance systems. The architecture of the Chinese Internet was designed from the outset to allow information control. There are just five backbones or hubs through which all traffic must pass. No matter what ISP is chosen by Internet users, their e-mails and the files they download and send must pass through one of these hubs.*

*To keep its foothold in this market, Yahoo! agreed to censor the Chinese version of its search engine and to control its discussion forums. So, if you enter "Taiwan independence" into its search engine, you get no results. The Google search engine is also controlled against its will by the Chinese government. China then succeeded in partially blocking its search results, excluding controversial subject matter. A search for the term Falungong, for example, now either temporarily blocks the user's connection or gives no result.*

*Some Chinese Internet users manage to dodge the censorship. One way is to use proxy relays, that is to say, by connecting to the Internet through servers based abroad. Systems were subsequently set up by activists abroad to help Internet users insider China to avoid the regime's filters.*

This perception of the situation in China echoes that of Ben Edelman and Center Co-director Zittrain at the "Documentation of Internet Filtering Worldwide" project at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society of Harvard Law School<sup>8</sup>. In their view, with the expansion of filtering, the Internet is actually, in the researchers' words, a "mosaic of webs"; the online view you have is dependent on several factors, including, most certainly, your physical location. According to the Asia Times<sup>9</sup>, Cisco Systems, Microsoft, Nortel Networks,

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.rsfs.org/article.php3?id\\_article=10749&Valider=OK](http://www.rsfs.org/article.php3?id_article=10749&Valider=OK)

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.ojr.org/ojr/world\\_reports/1037922526.php](http://www.ojr.org/ojr/world_reports/1037922526.php)

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Global\\_Economy/FA31Dj05.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Global_Economy/FA31Dj05.html)

Websense and Sun Microsystems have all been directly or indirectly involved in supplying Beijing with Internet equipment that can be used for censoring cyberspace in China. The motivation is, of course, the scramble for a foothold in the potentially gigantic Chinese market

Martin Woesler, editor of *China's Digital Dream* has been mentioned before as having a fairly optimistic view of the impact of the Internet in China, as a contrast to the gloomy picture painted above. He envisions the new tool of the Internet to offer a short cut which at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has already overcome censorship of news and some politically dissident views in the Chinese Internet. "Since Human Rights information is already accessible through the international news sites, the next stage will be the lifting of restrictions on Human Rights sites. China is now on its way to a Western-style information society."

He finds some support for this in a BBC story about free speech in cyberspace in China<sup>10</sup>, which claims that the Chinese government is finding the worldwide web much harder to censor than traditional media. "The more they do to block it, the more people want to get online," said Liu Xiaobo. "More and more, they're taking the chance to talk about politics and democracy". The fact that the Internet is so hard to control has also given it a role in making other media more open, according to Liu Xiaobo. "People judge newspapers on whether they can keep up with the internet", he said. No matter how sophisticated its technology there is no way the government can fully control the internet, according to Liu Qing, a prominent dissident who left China after his release from jail in 1992.

China Digital News links to a story about surprising glimpses of openness in the Chinese Internet landscape<sup>11</sup>. While the average Chinese still can't walk into an Internet cafe in Ningbo and pull up the homepage of the Taiwan government, he can read The New York Times. Even some sensitive topics, surprisingly, are readily available: "A quick browse through Wikipedia's Chinese-language version for the "June 4, Tiananmen" entry offers a broad look at the Democracy movement of 1989 and its violent end. Without using any special software or proxy servers, a Chinese web user can view the famed photo of a lone man facing down tanks outside the square 15 years ago in Beijing. "

Some, like Shanthi Kalathil, argue that the Internet in China may help to amplify a kind of nationalism that works to the advantage of the ruling regime, by giving it legitimacy or by justifying an aggressive foreign policy. Nina Hachigan in *China's Digital Dream* claims that China is attempting an extremely challenging balance, by both encouraging the growth of the Internet and actively regulating its political content and use. China tries to control cyberspace both through "high-tech", such as firewalls and filtering of search engines, but also through pressuring Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and Internet cafes to enforcing self-censorship, as well as jailing those attempting to use the Internet for criticism of the government. Even optimists regarding freedom of speech on the Internet admit that the Chinese government has so far been fairly successful in this strategy. In doing so, it has become the model for many authoritarian regimes around the world.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/3440911.stm>, 30<sup>th</sup> of January 2004,

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0909/p06s01-woap.html>, 8<sup>th</sup> of September 2004:



However, even though China has so far managed to keep a lid on potential challenges on the Internet, it is not certain that the situation will remain that way in the future. With a fast-growing online population, predicted to number 100 million persons within the next few years, it could prove difficult even for an authoritarian regime like the Chinese to control all Internet traffic should a major incident occur.

## 4.2 Internet censorship in Singapore

Singapore was one of the first countries to implement significant Internet censorship, and has been seen as a model by other non-democratic countries in Asia, like China. Elisabeth Staksrud wrote the master thesis *Ideology of Survival: Freedom of expression, Internet Regulation, and Political Legitimization in Singapore*, submitted for the Cand. Polit. Degree in Media Science at the University of Oslo the autumn of 1999:

*Singapore's regulations of the Internet are extensive. Whether or not they are also effective is difficult to measure in a policy study like this, but information from the SBA<sup>12</sup> and the media in Singapore indicate that the regulations are indeed working to the satisfaction of the government. Even if there are technical ways around the filtering, it seems like most people in Singapore are discouraged from trying to break the laws. The punishment is severe, and there seems to be a general acceptance for the content rules. In this respect, the Internet arena is no different than the arenas of politics or traditional media. The PAP<sup>13</sup> government has impelled stability in such a way that coercion has become unnecessary. Internet's great potential for surveillance will only add to the stability. From an outsider's point of view, it seems as the streamlining of the Internet, both in technical and in political terms, has made it a tool for governmental information, not public discussions. (Staksrud, page 88)*

According to a Freedom House report for 2003<sup>14</sup>, the PAP government uses civil defamation and other lawsuits against political foes. "The misuse of defamation suits by PAP leaders has contributed to a climate of self-censorship in Singapore," Amnesty International said shortly before the November 2001 election. No PAP leader has ever lost a defamation suit against an opposition figure. The media is also subject to governmental influence and restriction. The PAP runs an efficient, competent, and largely corruption-free government and appears to enjoy genuine popular support. It chalks up its electoral success to its record of having built Singapore into a modern, wealthy society and, it says, the opposition's lack of credible candidates and ideas. Most journalists work for media outlets that are linked to the government. Government-affiliated agencies operate all domestic broadcast media. Companies with close ties to the government also run Internet service providers and Singapore's cable television service. Though the government avidly promotes Internet use for shopping and other daily affairs, 1996 regulations forbid airing of information over the Internet that is against the "public interest" or "national harmony," or that "offends against

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<sup>12</sup> Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA), which monitors Internet activity.

<sup>13</sup> Peoples Action Party (PAP), the dominant political party in Singapore.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2003/countryratings/singapore.htm>

good taste or decency.” In practice, authorities prevent access to some Internet sites, most of them pornographic. The control system is not flawless, but was never made to be so:

*“Censorship was never intended to be 100 percent effective, it was intended as a political statement. The Internet in Singapore is by large dominated by the government, through legislation, content, control, surveillance, and public education. Against liberal expectations of the Internet as a force for erosion of authoritarian states, this study agrees with Rodan (1998:89) in suggesting a different proposition; that the technology might also be used for consolidating a climate of fear and intimidation. It can also disseminate propaganda and information in favour of the authorities. This suggest that future research on Internet developments, regulatory or otherwise, must be based in cultural and political variables, not on technical know-how, and telecommunication infrastructure. Information on the Internet does not flow in a vacuum, but in a political space that is already “occupied”. (Staksrud, page 93)*

The Reporters Without Borders<sup>15</sup> tell about the Singapore that “the government is everywhere, censorship rules and civil society is weak”. Such state control does not however include the excesses or violence found in China or Cuba. The leaders of the city-state warn that economic prosperity has to be paid for with freedom. The Internet in Singapore is almost devoid of political discussion and dissent only occurs on websites and discussion forums run from outside the country. Since the late 1990s, the Internet has been under the control of the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA), which monitors website access and content and calls for observance of a charter defining “responsible” Internet activity. It requires ISPs to block any sites containing material that supposedly undermines public security, national defence, racial and religious harmony and public morality and more than 100 sites considered pornographic are thought to have been blocked. ISPs have to follow a code of conduct and must have an operating licence. They must also install filters on their systems, which block most pornographic material but are also used to bar access to political content, especially at election-time. The online forum *Singapore Review*, which carries criticism of the government, was hacked into on 6 October 2003 by someone who flooded the Yahoo-hosted site with up to 600 bogus messages an hour, driving 200 participants out of the forum.

Manuel Castells describes the system in Singapore in this way:

*The Internet is not an instrument of freedom, nor is it the weapon of one-sided domination. The Singapore experience is a case in point. Guided by a strong, capable government, Singapore has fully embraced technological modernization as a development tool. At the same time, it is widely considered to be one of the most sophisticated authoritarian systems in history. Attempting to steer a narrow path between these two policies, the government of Singapore has tried to expand the use of the Internet among its citizens, while retaining political control over this use by censoring Internet service providers. And yet the study by Ho and Zaheer (2000) shows how, even in Singapore, civil society has been able to use the Internet to broaden its space of freedom, to articulate the defence of human rights, and to propose alternative views in the political debate. (Castells, page 164)*

Nina Hachigian in *China’s Digital Dream* ranks Singapore as one of the most successful and cost-effective examples of Internet censorship. Unlike China, Singapore has not spent much money on technically complicated campaigns to filter websites, or train legions of cyber police to arrest those who violate the rules. The government there has chosen the inexpensive

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<sup>15</sup> [http://www.rsrf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=10771](http://www.rsrf.org/article.php3?id_article=10771)

solution of intimidation through law suits, and instilling a mentality of self-censorship in the populace. This has been greatly facilitated by the fact that Singapore has been an economic success story, where people are “too busy making money to fool around with opposition politics.”

### 4.3 Internet censorship in Burma

Freedom House<sup>16</sup> describes Burma (Myanmar) as ruled by one of the world's most repressive regimes. The military junta rules by decree, controls the judiciary, suppresses nearly all basic rights, and commits human rights abuses with impunity. They sharply restrict press freedom, owning or tightly controlling all daily newspapers and radio and television stations and jailing dissident journalists. Authorities continued to arbitrarily search homes, intercept mail, and monitor telephone conversations. The regime's high-tech information warfare center in Rangoon reportedly can intercept private telephone, fax, e-mail, and radio communications. Laws and decrees criminalize possession and use of unregistered telephones, fax machines, computers and modems, and software.

Human Rights Watch reports<sup>17</sup> that eighteen journalists have been held on charges ranging from "illegal possession of a fax machine" to smuggling poetry out of prison. One Burmese national was arrested and accused of sending information to foreign radio stations, and the SPDC alleged that many more "informers" who were sending information to foreign media would be arrested soon. Two Burmese magazines, *Living Color* and *Mhyar Nat Maung Mingalar*, were each shut down for one month for minor infractions.

Regarding Internet connections, the Reporters Without Borders<sup>18</sup> inform that Internet connections are very rare in Burma, partly for reasons of poverty but mostly because of the military regime's harsh crackdown on freedom of expression. The Internet was introduced in Burma in 2001. There are only two ISPs, one directly controlled by the telecommunications ministry and the other, Bagan Cybertech, by the prime minister's son. Only a few hundred hand-picked people - regime officials, top military figures and heads of export companies - are allowed access to the Internet. Even for the privileged, this mostly means just e-mail and only for professional reasons. About 20,000 accounts (costing a once-off 40-80 euros for lifetime access) existed by mid-2003. E-mail is strictly filtered by the posts and telecommunications authority and military intelligence. About 25,000 people had access in 2003 to the Myanmar Wide Web, a local intranet set up by the regime and giving access to just a few thousand online publications, mostly on government service or administrative sites permitted by the authorities. Opening a personal Internet account, which must first be approved by the regime, costs 260 euros, while companies must pay 600 euros.

Marika Luder submitted her master thesis at the Department of Media and Communication, the University of Oslo, in 2001. Entitled *Online Relations – A case study exploring the social, cultural and political value of the Internet for exile-Burmese*, it deals with the way Burmese in exile make use of the Internet:

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2003/countryratings/burma.htm>

<sup>17</sup> <http://hrw.org/wr2k3/asia2.html>

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=10748](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10748)

*The Internet has a clear political significance for the Burmese. My main assumptions have been confirmed. I have found that the respondents value the Internet as a device that is usable for dispersing and retrieving information and for communication about Burma-related issues. Conquering geographical distance, different time zones, and the insignificant cost of using the Internet are major advantages mass media and other communication devices cannot match. The characteristics of the Internet are especially valuable for minority groups like the Burmese. The Internet is thus empowering those who struggle for democracy in Burma.*

Although she also cautions against exaggerating the democratic potentials of the Internet, she points out that information gained by people using the Internet, will be dispersed among people offline. However, people within Burma will benefit very little from the work the Burmese diaspora is doing, as it is extremely difficult for outsiders to communicate with people inside the country.

Briefly speaking, Burma is an authoritarian country that has met the challenge of the Internet by quite simply keeping it out altogether, which places it in the company of nations such as North Korea. Staying offline is no doubt the safest way to avoid trouble. The big catch is that you risk losing out on important economic sectors, and becoming increasingly isolated internationally. For this reason, it is likely that even Burma will slowly move in the direction of other Asian nations.

## **5. The situation in Iran – Politics and censorship**

The following description of the political situation in Iran is largely based upon the assessment made by Freedom House in 2003<sup>19</sup>.

In 1979, Iran witnessed a tumultuous revolution that ousted a hereditary monarchy and brought into power the cleric Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who presided over the establishment of the modern world's first Islamic republic. After Khomeini's death in June 1989, the role of supreme leader passed to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a middle-ranking cleric who lacked the religious credentials and popularity of his predecessor. The most powerful governing institutions in Iran, such as the Council of Guardians and the judiciary, are neither elected nor subservient to elected bodies. Of the 814 candidates who declared their intention to run in the 2001 presidential election, only 10 were approved. The supreme leader is chosen for life by the Assembly of Experts, a clerics-only body whose members are elected to eight-year terms by popular vote from a government-screened list of candidates. The supreme leader directly appoints the head of the judiciary, who in turn appoints the Supreme Court and other senior judges. Bribery is common. The penal code is based on Sharia.

By 1997, dismal economic conditions had created widespread dissatisfaction. Mohammed Khatami, a former culture minister advocating greater freedoms, was elected president with 69 percent of the vote. Reformers made considerable strides over the next few years in expanding freedoms. Dozens of reformist newspapers representing diverse views were allowed to publish, and the authorities relaxed the enforcement of strict Islamic dress codes for women and restrictions on social interaction. The 2000 parliamentary elections evidenced

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/freeworld/2003/countryratings/iran.htm>

a backlash by conservatives that continues to this day. Dozens of reformist newspapers have been shut down, and hundreds of liberal journalists and students, as well as political activists, have been jailed, mostly on charges of defamation and spreading false information about the government.

Freedom of expression is limited. The government directly controls all television and radio broadcasting and has recently begun jamming RFE/RL Persian service broadcasts and selectively enforcing a ban on satellite dishes. Bills introduced by the current parliament to reverse the amendments and introduce other judicial reforms were rejected by the Guardian Council. Since 2000, over 85 publications have been shut down by the judiciary and dozens of journalists have been arrested, often held incommunicado for extended periods of time and convicted in closed-door trials. The 1979 constitution prohibits public demonstrations that "violate the principles of Islam," a vague provision used to justify the heavy-handed dispersal of assemblies and marches. Violent disruptions of demonstration are usually carried out by Ansar-e Hezbollah, a vigilante group linked to hard-line government figures. According to Human Rights Watch, torture is still widespread in Iran<sup>20</sup>:

*Iran's outgoing reformist parliament in May passed legislation to prohibit torture, but without effective implementation, the law remains an empty gesture. "Claims that reforms in Iran have put an end to torture are simply false," said Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Human Rights Watch's Middle East and North Africa Division. "More than ever, journalists, intellectuals and activists are afraid to voice opinions critical of the government." The Iranian government's use of these harsh techniques has largely squelched the country's political opposition and independent media. Faced with increasing political pressure for reform in the past four years, the government has intensified its campaign against dissent. As of June, the government has closed virtually all independent newspapers.*

Amnesty International confirms that<sup>21</sup> scores of political prisoners, including prisoners of conscience, continued to serve sentences imposed in previous years following unfair trials. Scores more were arrested in 2003, often arbitrarily and many following student demonstrations. Judicial authorities curtailed freedoms of expression, scores of publications were closed, Internet sites were filtered and journalists were imprisoned. At least one detainee died in custody, reportedly after being beaten.

Reporters Without Borders<sup>22</sup> claim that Iran remains in a dramatic and paradoxical press freedom situation. It is the biggest prison for journalists in the Middle East, with harsh censorship but also a prolific and vigorous written press that is clearly helping the growth of civil society. This press mirrors the split between the regime's reformists and hardliners, who are part of a unique regime headed by the hardline Supreme Guide of the Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and a reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, who does not have much power.

In *Oil in the Gulf – Obstacles to Democracy and Development*, edited by Daniel Heradstveit and Helge Hveem, Mehrzad Boroujerdi writes about "The Reformist Movement in Iran". He foresees a continuation of the struggle between Reformists and Hardliners in Iran. He also notes the vibrant interest in political issues in the country:

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<sup>20</sup> <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2004/06/07/iran8774.htm>

<sup>21</sup> <http://web.amnesty.org/report2004/irn-summary-eng>

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=9940&Valider=OK](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=9940&Valider=OK)

*Iranians are now experiencing perhaps the most serious national debate in their history on such themes as the merits of democracy, tolerance, non-violence, globalization and modernity. Hence, we should be equally sceptical of predictions about the imminent and/or inevitable final victory by either the reformists or the conservatives. (Heradstveit, page 70)*

Daniel Heradstveit in the chapter “The Psychology of Corruption in Azerbaijan and Iran” indicates that the concepts of and attitudes towards corruption differ in the two nations. He notes that the Iranians display “exactly the type of understanding of corruption associated with modern secular democracies.” (Heradstveit, page 88) From different angles, both Boroujerdi and Heradstveit hint about a growing democratic awareness and maturity among the Iranian population, something that is not yet reflected in the political institutions in the Islamic Republic. Perhaps this could explain parts of the internal tensions in Iran, where the general public have mentally outgrown and rejected some of the values and ideas from the early days of the Republic, but the conservatives still cling on to these.

When it comes to the Internet specifically, the OpenNet Initiative<sup>23</sup> states that Iran is indeed engaged in extensive Internet content filtering beyond just pornography, including many political, religious, social, and blogging websites. Most of these censored websites are Iran-specific; very little non-pornographic, “global” content is filtered from Iranian users. With respect to mostly non-Iranian websites, such as general human rights, news, and government websites, Iran appears not to be engaging in much content filtering at all. Pornography, sex, gay, and some proxy/anonymous surfing-related websites from around the world are all subject to censorship. But at the present time, Iran seems mostly concerned with filtering Iranian, and mostly Farsi-language, content. The Reporters Without Borders support this view<sup>24</sup>, but also notes that “the Internet has grown faster in Iran than any other Middle Eastern country since 2000 and has become an important medium, providing fairly independent news and an arena for vigorous political discussion for more than three million users.” Probably the most detailed accounts of Internet censorship in Iran can be found at StopCensoringUs, which has tracked the different steps of the Iranian government during the crackdown this summer.

Briefly summed up, we can say that Iran is a non-democratic country, where the regime suffers from a lack of trust in a population that has become disillusioned with some of the ideals of the Islamic Republic established by Ayathollah Khomeini 25 years ago. The prolonged power struggle between what has been dubbed Hardliners and Reformists, and the continuous debate over how to define the Iranian state has created a politically aware public. At the same time, the Islamic government uses brutal means to keep a lid on discussions that they deem as undermining their legitimacy. The issue of Internet censorship, and the popularity of weblogs in Iran should be seen against this backdrop.

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<sup>23</sup> <http://opennetinitiative.net/bulletins/004/>

<sup>24</sup> [http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=10733](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10733)

## 6.1 About weblogs

What is a weblog? I will adopt the definition of a weblog made by Dr Jill Walker, Dept of Humanistic Informatics, University of Bergen<sup>25</sup>. The full definition will be included in the appendix section, but I will give a shortened one here:

A weblog, or \*blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged so the most recent post appears first. Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal. Since anybody with an Internet connection can publish their own weblog, there is great variety in the quality, content, and ambition of weblogs, and a weblog may have anywhere from a handful to tens of thousands of daily readers. Most weblogs use links generously, allowing readers to follow conversations between weblogs by following links between entries on related topics.

Iranian blogger Hossein Derakhshan's definition of a weblog, taken from the interview that is also quoted in full in the appendix section, is as follows:

*From a formal point of view, I think they should be sorted in a reverse chronological way, they should have permanent links. In terms of the style and content they should have an opinion and a point-of-view which most of the times makes them far from objectivity. But their content can be anything from a simple diary written for high-school friends and family or social and political commentary written for a much wider and more serious audience. Both of these are weblogs in my opinion, but they serve different purposes. Because weblog is just another tool or medium and it could be used in different ways.*

According to Rebecca Blood in *We've Got Blog – How weblogs are changing our culture*, the term “weblog” was first coined by John Barger as late as December 1997. Until tools for making weblogs on your own started appearing in 1999 onwards, there were only a few dozen weblogs in the world. Now, there are at least two million of them, in the global community sometimes referred to as the “blogosphere”. Derakhshan tells about what attracts him to blogging:

*First of all, I'm my own editor; nobody can censor me in any way. Second, blogs provide a personal perspective to current news and events, especially now that mainstream media is pretending to be biased, but is deeply commercialized. Third, blogs in closed societies provide a unique chance for improving the freedom of speech and information.*

*I see Internet as a capable tool which can be exploited for socio-political change, especially in a closed society like Iran where the government has a strong grip on media and therefore on the general debates. My experience on blogs proved to me that even one person can make a big difference using both imagination and new technologies.*

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<sup>25</sup> [http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog\\_theorising/final\\_version\\_of\\_weblog\\_definition.html](http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog_theorising/final_version_of_weblog_definition.html)

## 6.2 Iranian weblogs

According to BlogCensus.net<sup>26</sup>, there are more than 2, 1 million weblogs in the world, whereof about 1, 4 million, or two-thirds, are estimated to be active. The majority of these, 1, 3 million are in English, and then comes French with 87 thousand, Portugese and Farsi. Farsi (Persian) is the fourth most common weblog language on the planet, with 64.049 registered blogs. This should tell us something of just how popular blogs are among Iranians today. Weblogs by Iranians in English, which my master thesis is going to focus on, hardly make up more than about one hundred blogs. In Iran, even Vice-President Mohammad Ali Abtahi himself set up one of these mini-sites. Weblogs are much used at times of crisis, such as during the June 2003 student demonstrations, when they were the main source of news about the protests and helped the students to rally and organise.<sup>27</sup>

Iranian feminist magazine Badjens<sup>28</sup> speculates that two decades of continuously playing contradictory roles in different spaces has led to a kind of identity crisis, especially among youth, whose only lived experience is under the Islamic Republic. “For many bloggers, the weblog becomes a mirror into their souls; a place where they represent their true selves and define themselves according to their liking, without the social and cultural constraints that impede them in real spaces.”

Famous Iranian blogger Sina Motallebi, who spent 23 days in jail for his activities in Iran and who now lives in Holland, gave this enlightening interview about the effects and function of weblogs in Iran today<sup>29</sup>:

*OJR: Why do you think Weblogs have become so popular inside Iran and with Iranians abroad?*

*Motallebi: I think there are two reasons, one social and one technical. Socially in Iran, we haven't experienced a [free] society where everyone can express their ideas. We don't experience the freedom of expression that much. But Weblogs give the opportunity to Iranians to speak freely and share their ideas, their views, and even the details of their personal lives.*

*Freedom of expression was also important for people talking about their personal life, especially for girls and women. That's the reason you see many Iranian females blogging now. Under Islamic rules, many things are prohibited for young people. Each week many Iranian youngsters are arrested only for going to a party or walking with a friend of the opposite sex. So normally, they can't even talk about their personal life. But online with their fake names, or in some cases their real names, they can mention their personal lives and experience freedom of speech.*

*OJR: How important are English-language Weblogs by Iranians outside of Iran?*

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<sup>26</sup> <http://www.blogcensus.net/?page=lang>

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=10733](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=10733)

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.badjens.com/rediscovery.html>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/glaser/1073610866.php>



*Motallebi: It's very important because they introduced Persian bloggers to the rest of the world. I think they give a more realistic image of life in Iran, because before that, the common image about Iran was created by politicians. Both pro-government and counter-government people have created extreme and unrealistic images of Iran. But when Iranian English-language writers like Hossein and Pedram connected the Iranian blogosphere to the world, they promoted a realistic image of Iran and showed what an ordinary Iranian thinks.*

About the last point made by Motabelli, on the value of the diaspora and Iranians in exile such as Hossein Derakhshan, Shanthi Kalathil has this to say in *Open Networks, Closed Regimes*:

*The members of diasporas, who tend to be better off and better educated than most of the public at home, may have more opportunities to air their views online. Their use of the Internet can both support and oppose the regime at home. (...) Since diaspora members are unconstrained by the censorship that those in their home country experience, they may feel freer to express their views online. Thus, diaspora discourse is often more extreme than that found at home. (Kalathil, page 149)*

As will be shown later, this seems partly to be confirmed in my material, since there are some indications that Insiders, Iranians in Iran, tend to be more anonymous than Outsiders, Iranians in the diaspora abroad.

### **6.3 About the descriptions of the weblogs:**

Since the main focus of the thesis will be on censorship issues, I will not place a lot of emphasis on issues such as lay-out concerning the weblogs. When describing them, I will only mention aspects of the blogs that could be deemed relevant from a Free Speech point of view. I made the questions of what to look for based mainly on what would be most interesting about the weblogs made by Insiders, Iranians living within the Islamic Republic. This seems fair, as Outsiders, Iranians living in Western democratic countries, have the opportunity of expressing pretty much whatever they want. Blogs made by Outsiders are interesting for other reasons, such as providing a contrast to the Insider weblogs, and exploring what kind of connections there are between the two groups.

I have concentrated first on the time period from the spring of 2004 to the early fall, the same period as I have been writing my thesis. I have consulted earlier postings at the various weblogs, to examine their track records. Whenever a post earlier than April 2004 is referred to, it is taken from the “archives” section of the weblog in question. Whether or not this post is exactly as it was when first published is hard to say for sure in each individual case. In general, this is usually the case, but it is hard for me to verify with absolute certainty.

Regarding links, I differentiate between two main categories of Internet links. The first one is comprised of permanent links, sometimes named “permalinks”. These are websites that are put in the “Links” section at the weblog, and thus assumed to be websites that the author approves of, likes or reads on a regular basis.

The other kind can be labeled “internal” links, or links from the posts at the weblog. For instance, if a post on the 10<sup>th</sup> of February is about a certain incident, the blogger may link to a related story in a newspaper about this same topic, to give more information. From a censorship vs. Free Speech point of view, both kinds of links are interesting, but the last kind more so. If a weblog links to the CNN as a permalink, it can be taken as a proof that the author did have access to reading the CNN at some point when the weblog was established. If he or she links to the CNN in a post at a specific date, say the 10<sup>th</sup> of February 2004, it can be taken as proof that the author had access to the CNN on that particular day. The distinction is an important one, as it is perfectly possible that an Iranian Insider could read a certain website in December 2003, but no longer in August 2004, if there has been increasing censorship during this time period. Because there are strong indications of an Internet crackdown in Iran in June 2004, in the middle of my study period, dates for internal links are usually stated when referred to.

As the weblogs by Insiders are the most important ones for this study, I will start with them, and also give more space and emphasis to them. In describing these blogs, I have chosen to look for answers to some of the following questions.

- Does the owner and author of the website clearly identify himself or herself? Is there a name, photo or other personal information listed that states who the person is, or is this written in some of the posts? Is there an email address or other contact information? This is relevant, as an individual living in a non-free state may be careful with criticizing the government or the authorities if they expect reprisals. If it turns out that a high percentage of the weblogs by Insiders have more or less anonymous authors, this could in itself be an indication of censorship or fear of censorship.
- Does the blog link to weblogs and websites outside Iran, which indicates that the Insider has access to information not censored by the Iranian authorities? Needless to say, this also goes for Western news outlets, Human Rights organizations, websites critical of religion and other “oppositional” voices. Basically anything that would be deemed “undesirable” by Hardliners in the Islamic Republic.
- Does the blog refer to, either by linking directly to or by quoting or mentioning in a post, blogs by Outsiders or Western and non-government controlled media? This is of course the strongest evidence that the person behind the weblog in Iran does have access to outside information, or is able to circumvent whatever censorship efforts are in place.
- Is there a “comments” option on the postings at the weblog? This does not have to be important, as many blogs with little traffic receive few comments, anyway. But if there are a few comments, it could be useful to know where they are from and look for patterns. It is especially interesting to look for Iranian Insiders making comments at the blogs of Iranian Outsiders, to establish that people in Iran do have access to these. Unfortunately, it may be hard to decide whether or not the comment was made by a person from within the Islamic Republic, but it is occasionally implicitly or explicitly stated. Some weblogs also have something called a “trackback” option, where you can see if other blogs or websites have placed links to this particular post. Again, for most of the blogs, this possibility is either not there or not very much used, but as it could in principle be interesting to track such evidence of communication, I will include a mentioning of it from time to time.

- What are the posts about? How frequent are new posts added to the blog? How many of them deal explicitly with potentially sensitive social, political or religious issues? Again, the assumption that the weblog at least occasionally touches upon such themes was part of the selection process. But there are different degrees of “political” contents.

Here are some of the weblogs by Insiders, Iranians living inside the Islamic Republic of Iran, that I have chosen to pay particular attention and scrutiny. Since the posts on these weblogs are the main case study objects of this thesis, I have to quote parts of them here, to analyze them in some detail.

## 7.1 Weblogs by Insiders, Iranians in Iran:

<http://aliparvaresh.com/posts/1604.aspx>

The author of the weblog identifies himself by name as Ali Parvaresh, a student of mathematics in Tehran. His contact address is given as mailbox@aliparvaresh.com His blog “Tech guru” does, as the name indicates, focus mainly on computer technical issues, software and Internet subjects. He mentions attempts of Internet censorship in his country in some of his posts, and is relevant because of this. He reports about increased censorship in June, but does link very extensively and frequently to Western media even after this. The weblog has got permalinks to many weblogs abroad, especially technically related ones, in addition to many internal links and references in his postings. The archives at the weblog go back to May 2003.

*Iranian Users Will be Monitored Now and On*

*Posted at Monday, June 07, 2004 2:45 PM*

*According to an interview with a Justice Department of Iran's authority, Iranian users will be monitored on their web sites, weblogs, emails and even chatrooms to prevent illegal actions. They have asked ISPs to record log files of users activities for 3 months so illegal actions can be traced.*

*Nedstat is Blocked!*

*Posted at Wednesday, June 16, 2004 5:14 PM*

*Hehe, so funny. I just noticed Nedstat web site, which is offering free stats services all over the world, has been blocked by my respectful ISP, Sepanta. I am wondering when is www.google.com's turn!*

*MovableType.org is Blocked!*

*Posted at Friday, June 18, 2004 3:19 PM*

*As I predicted, Google is next. Now, MovableType.org is blocked. You all know what it is, don't know? The famous blogging tool!*

*Dan Gillmor and Iran's Net Censorship*

*Posted at Wednesday, June 23, 2004 4:35 PM*

*Dan Gillmor is pointing to Hoder's Stop Censoring Us site. Thanks Dan.*

*"Title" Keyword is Blocked Totally!*

*Posted at Sunday, June 27, 2004 2:25 PM*

*In my ISP, Sepanta, any URL containing the word "Title" or any combination of it, is assumed a URL which should be blocked. That's why Second News XML Service is blocked, Khyal Gallery's Sub Title picture is blocked, Nedstat Title is blocked and the rest which you might have faced till now. I think tomorrow "Ali Parvaresh" will be blocked :)*

*Feedback*

*# re: "Title" Keyword is Blocked Totally!*

*6/27/2004 2:54 PM by Keyvan Nayyeri*

*Yesterday two webpages of Axblog.NET were blocked for 5 minutes!*

*It's strange that many erotic sites are available for every one but many of reference sites are blocked!*

<http://broodingpersian.blogspot.com/>

The author does not clearly reveal his true identity, only his contact email [utanazad@yahoo.com](mailto:utanazad@yahoo.com). He does not have many permanent links to newspapers or media, more to blogs, including Outsiders such as [blogsbyiranians.com](http://blogsbyiranians.com), and cultural and historical websites, inside and outside of Iran. On the other hand, there is a great deal of links and references to Western news outlets in his posts, from the BBC to the National Review Online, which proves that the author must be reading non-Iranian media on a regular basis. He also links to [daneshjoo.org](http://daneshjoo.org), the Student Movement for Democracy in Iran, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 2004. This is an organization of Iranians in exile that is highly critical of the regime, and also contains one of the few active Iranian discussion forums in English. The weblog is frequently updated, and writes about a variety of political, cultural and religious issues, often in the shape of small essays. Many of them have a sting towards the regime and the Islamic Republic, some even to the religion of Islam itself. According to the archives section, the 18<sup>th</sup> of December 2003 was the first post of this weblog.

*Sunday, September 12, 2004*

*About Beslan*

*Is it Islam? Of course it is. At least a particularly odious strand of Islam even when overtly generous! "Who are we trying to kid?" I am thinking. Here in Iran, for instance, the first sign of their activism was spraying acid on the faces of women deemed improperly dressed according to their understanding of the Islamic etiquette. They are doing their best to drive women out of public spheres in Iraq, and we know how they forced women to retreat inside imprisoning them in various Afghan homes, and denying them education. And well Saudi Arabia has always been Saudi Arabia. So now they ride the wave of the agonizing misery of some Chechen women to open a new front in their tribal war of hate, and ruin. At the end of the day I think YES, in a sense, it has everything to do with Islam.*

*Thursday, July 22, 2004*

*Can't wait to see the actual report on 9/11, especially the section about the alleged Iranian connection. In anticipation, I looked at Ledeen's<sup>30</sup> latest musings. Lots of*

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<sup>30</sup> Ledeen's article appeared in the US publication the National Review Online

*interesting stuff. I must admit, though, that nothing our ruling clergy does can surprise me much. They have blood on their hands...mostly our own citizens':*

*Sunday, August 22, 2004*

*Access Denied<sup>31</sup>*

*Here I am checking the Olympic results and perusing some pictures and I get this ridiculously omnipresent message again. Our guardians of moral purity didn't want us to see this picture. Terribly threatening, isn't it?*

*How to react? We could always start with the obvious: why is it that one IPS provider censors the image while another does not! Or what would be the basis for censoring the wrestlers, while the swimmers, the divers, the weightlifters, the track and field athletes are not touched, even though they bare more flesh? Or why censor the female wrestlers without censoring the males? Or why censor at all?*

*But really, we would want to avoid most of these questions because when in doubt, all governments tend to err on the side of "caution."*

*Bullies don't do nuances, remember.*

<http://damnto.blogspot.com/>

This weblog has absolutely no permanent links. The author appears to be almost totally anonymous, and does not have any contact information listed. New posts appear several times a week, but are often very brief, even just one sentence. The blog gives a rather informal impression, like an electronic diary where the author writes about almost anything he has done or thought about that day. It does not have a pronounced political profile, but does occasionally link in postings to Western news outlets such as ABC News, and weblogs by Outsiders such as Hoder.<sup>32</sup> The weblog has a "comments" option, but few comments have been submitted. The archive stretches back to November 2003.

*2004-09-06*

*ERROR: The requested URL could not be retrieved  
hehe, Iran government has filtered Yahoo! Geocities completely,  
what the heck!*

*2004-02-14*

*I was checking my sitemeter today and I noticed that I have a visitor from NIPR.mil which has been redirected from BlogsByIranians to my damned weblog. I played a little with google and alltheweb and I found that Nipr.mil is not a single domain a but a hush-hush web proxy that acts as a gateway for hundreds of U.S. military domains in order to hide their identities. It was established by the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) to increase the readiness for Information Warfare.*

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<sup>31</sup> This link was to Yahoo.com.

<sup>32</sup> "Hoder" is what Hossein Derakhshan, a famous Iranian Outsider blogger, calls himself. The blog: <http://hoder.com/weblog/> is discussed later.

*I think it's a good point for Persian bloggers that American officials read their blogs to get info about our current damned situation, but dear big brother, remember that less than seven percent of Iranians have internet access. don't forget them in your calculations!*

2003-12-18

*Damn to DCI (Data Communications of IRAN).  
They filtered my favorite nude site (DOMAI)*

<http://iraniandiaries.blogspot.com/>

This blog has got no permalinks, but the author links to Outsiders such as Iranfilter and blogsbyiranians.com from his Persian language weblog. It seems to have been started in January 2004, but the blog has not been updated since the middle of June, during the period of Internet censorship crackdown in Iran. It is unclear whether the sudden end to postings is related to increased censorship, but since the last post complains about problems with filtering, this could be the case. This weblog of course illustrates the dilemma that even if a weblog is active when you start reading it, there is no guarantee that it will stay that way.

Last post:

*Monday, June 14, 2004  
Filter filter everywhere*

*(message I get after trying to connect to <http://i.hoder.com> via Sepanta internet card)*

*They're filtering us. They're making us filtered. They're controlling us. They're making us controlled. But they think. They think in a wrong way. Or better to say they don't think. They just make mistake. Islamic Republic of Iran is just a mistake. A mis-decision. A wrong action. They are, however, governing us. And the costs of their mis-decisions and wrong actions we should pay.*

*Raid after raid. Attack after attack. And now, internet is on the target. It's the black spot. The gun is triggered.*

*I have been using internet card Sepanta, which comes in 5, 10, or 20 hours. I usually buy 10 or 20 hour cards, which cost 30000 and 58000 Rials (about US\$4 and US\$7), respectively. Before that, I used to buy Alborz internet cards, that was a little cheaper than Sepanta, but lower speed and longer time behind the busy line to connect. Alborz got disconnected after 2 hours of continuous use, but most important of all, one day it made filters on the websites, according the order of ICT ministry. Watching it has got filtered my favo-sites, I searched for a good card to replace it. Sepanta, which one of my friends told me about it, was really cool.*

*Sepanta had (and has) no waiting cause of busy line. In the very first call it connects, remains at a good speed (in scale of a dial-up connection of course!), and doesn't get disconnected until you close the connection. You can remain connected and love your web surfing as much as your card time allows. It had a very good quality, and above all, no website was filtered under Sepanta. You see: it HAD, it WAS. It is not a good*

*card anymore. All of these are just cause of that stupid governors and decision-makers (mis-decisionmakers) of Iran.*

*I don't have access to lots of my favo-websites and weblogs. They have even filtered about all of the known filter-breakers yet. They make me crazy. I can't see even my own weblog (sometimes) I get Access Denied page. I get Page Was Not Found page. I get nowhere. Sepanta is no longer my favo-card. But there is no favo-card in Iran any longer. The stupid government has decided to filter more and more, as minister of ICT told today to Persian-language Shargh newspaper.*

*One day they say they're going to remove all satellite dishes from Tehran roofs, other day they confront young drivers cause of loud voice of their cars' cassette- or CD-players. And now it's web's turn. Turn to turn. Ends to nowhere.*

*If these kinds of access-denying and making things forbidden for people had anything to do, we shouldn't see lots of people dieing and getting blind cause of drinking manipulated, toxic alcohol drinks (just recently more than 20 people died or severely injured after drinking counterfeit alcohol drinks in the southern city of Shiraz (the hometown of Perspolis Palace and its ancinet King Cyrus the Great)). [Selling, buying, owning and drinking alcoholic drinks are forbidden according Iran's law.]*

*Removing the question doesn't remove its entity; this just makes people to seek its answer in many other ways--that are not necessarily safe and danger-free. It's something that Islamic Republic governors CAN'T understand.*

<http://www.iranian-girl.blogspot.com/>

Description of the weblog:

This weblog by Iranian-girl has no permanent links whatsoever to any websites. The author reveals very little about herself, and does not point to many external websites or make indirect references to it in her postings. She does post a contact email address: fatema\_iraniangirl@yahoo.com. This is the only personal information you can detect on the website, except for the fact that she seems to be a student in Tehran and in September 2003 says she is 21 years old. She also posts under the name "Fatema". Whether this is her real name or not is not known. The first post in her archives section dates from the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2003. The blog has been updated with some frequency until March 2004, when posts started becoming more scarce. There were a bit more posts in July, and still few in August. A pattern that does fit the schedule of a student reading for her exams.

The most interesting thing about the author is that she is quite critical of the mullahs and the Iranian Islamic regime, and indeed of Islam itself. She has a strong undercurrent of Western-influenced Feminism in some of her posts, and mentions reading Simone De Beauvoir. As said before, she does not have many links in here posts, but in October 2003 she links to Yahoo! News and Fox News regarding Iranian Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi, and gives indications that she visits non-Iranian websites elsewhere.

*Monday, December 08, 2003*

*It seems that i never get tired of gossiping about Islam and its prophet!*

*what i want to say is that the more hijab rules are strict in society, the more men become sensitive about it, about the prophet's instructions, "cultivate the virtue of modesty in your daughters, for the sake of safety as much as anything else." my mother has a small book full of prophet Mohammad's advices for women and girls,, i read it, and after that i draw a conclusion, 90% of his sayings were in a way which were profitable for men! (and its not strange, he himself was a man, and a selfish one). im going to write some parts of that book here in future,(and if somebody says that we can't be sure if Mohammed said them or not, i will have a very good answer for him/her! so just try it!)*

*i was wondering, if he was in a developed country in 2003, how could he made the educated clever women to accept the funny law that says " a man can have 4 wives!" and how could he himself marry several young beautiful girls with this excuse that their husbands were killed in war and it was his duty as a prophe to protect these women, with marrying them!.*

*i guess the story of prophet's private life would be published in all newspapers and magazines , people could read and laugh!*

*Saturday, November 08, 2003*

*i was shocked after i heared those horrible news!!!*

*the only thing which is worth for their men, is their nasty prejudice! which has changed them into cruel animals!! 45 young girls were murdered by their close families in just 1 month!*

*one of them was a girl whose brother had found a card! in her books, a card with no any name or writing on it, the brother killed her, because the girl could never prove that she had not got the card from a boy!!!*

*all of these amateur murderers have a common reason, they say that they wanted to keep their honour, although they loved their families!*

*whats makes the government keep silence about these disasters?*

*and, what makes the whole world not to care for those innocent girls who are living in that hell ?*

*Saturday, November 01, 2003*

*Isn't it funny? the governmental laws and rules in Iran (with a semi-modern society) are defined from the pattern which had been followed by savage Arabian tribes in about 1400 years ago! they used to neglect all women's rights, just like most other countries in that old time, but the silly point is that we are still obeying them,...!*

*In the law book of Islamic Republic of Iran you can find such clear discriminations against women that makes the reader doubt if the edition date of the book is really 2003!!!*

*there are thousands of these silly discriminations in the rules of iran which are applying right now in the courts, families, and totally entire ISLAMIC society...!! they are like dark shadows, following you during your life, always reminding you that in this religion, you are considered as slaves and men are masters!! it can be really so painful for any girl and woman with self-respect, injure the pride badly!!!*



<http://omidmemarian.blogspot.com/>

This is an intensely political weblog, updated a couple of times a week. The author himself describes the blog like this: “Omid Memarian, Iranian Journalist in this weblog deals to situation of democracy and civil society and especially youth in Iran today....and talk about some daily events....and some personal experiences”. The author is remarkably open, and even shows his photo, in addition to his full name. He has internal links to stories from Western news outlets in many of his posts, and permanent links to Yahoo!, Hoder and other Iranian Insiders like View\_from\_Iran.<sup>33</sup> He has got a “comments” possibility, but this does not appear to be widely used. Judging from his posts, the author must be involved in working with many NGOs, including on subjects that perhaps might be seen as “sensitive”. The first post was submitted on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 2003

*Thursday, September 09, 2004*

*New round of arrests...*

*Last day one of my friends in Hayateno Newspaper called me and was surprised that I answered him. “I think you are arrested”. He said. I was surprised too. I asked him that why he thinks I have to be in the prison. He explain that two friends of us are has been arrested on Tuesday. One of them Babak write artistic articles and comments. He mentioned that there is list of writers that they believe they will arrest in the coming days. I don’t know really what to say. Because, I haven’t been active in the political sphere during the last year. During the last two years the number of my political articles and comments are less than 10. I think that there is no reason for arresting young journalists and writers like me of my friends in newspapers because we are the kids of revolution. What happened for the revolution that after 25 years is trying to eat its children?*

*Sunday, July 18, 2004*

*Two Papers Banned again ....*

*Vaghaye Newspaper which I had a weekly page on civil society in it, banned yesterday. Jomhooriyat newspaper forced to stop publishing. I lost another paper to work with. Forced migration to another paper.....The court has banned Vaghaye because of its "action" against the national security by publishing articles and comments. Let’s just concentrate for a minute to see what has happened to the security of the country which is threatened so badly to the extend, that by writing short comments or articles it deserves to be shut dawn. The question is what kind of a country we have that by writing articles the security of it becomes so vulnerable and fragile. God save the people....*

*Sunday, June 20, 2004<sup>34</sup>*

*Look at the last version of black list websites in Iran*

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<sup>33</sup> This is a weblog by Insiders, described later in this thesis.

<sup>34</sup> He links to *StopCensoringUs*, the weblog by Outsiders dedicated to tracking Internet censorship in Iran.

*Monday, June 14, 2004*

*During the last days many ISP (Internet Service Provider) has been closed by the court. Now we can only use the ISPs which are under the control of government. It means we have to ignore many website which has been filtered by them. Many political websites can not be seen these days, so access to information is getting limited more and more.*

*Monday, May 17, 2004*

*Alcohol Drink in the Islamic country*

*During the last days papers reported about the amount of alcohol usage in Tehran. “ thousands of litres alcohol are bought from pharmacies in Tehran and the other cities. White alcohol is the best seller product.” Say these reports. But nobody knows that the usage of alcohol that is presented in the pharmacies during the last years and specially last year, has not medical application. Drinking alcohol is common in Iran society like many other countries. But it has forbidden after revolution. The head of police hast year announced that more than 1 million liters of alcohol drink discovered by the police agents form the border provinces. It shows the market of alcohol is lucrative. Many people believe this market is under the control of some hidden institution that can bring huge amount of alcohol in Iran and also distribute it completely. Normal people can not do it. In Tehran you can by every kind of famous brand of alcohol drink. Beer, Champagne, Vodka and so on in every brand is available in Tehran easily. Like the other things that was forbidden at the beginning of revolution the dynamic of society push back the wrong polices of the clerics who wanted to bring the heaven for people, but know are importing the .... In this way, it seems that some alcohol drink factory has established near the boarders. Who knows about the founders of this profitable market in Islamic country?*

<http://tahdabir.blogspot.com/>

This weblog is identified as: “Hassan Ghandian's English weblog on Iran, politic, social, art and human”. The name, “Editor: Not Myself” is a humorous twist to Hoder’s blog name, “Editor: Myself”. According to the personal profile, Mr. Ghandian is 24-year-old student of civil engineering from Tabriz, Iran. The blog contains many permalinks. Most of them to weblogs, including by Outsiders, but also to news websites like the BBC, Wired and Voice Of America. There are many references to websites oppositional to the Iranian regime. He links to Activistchat.com the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, which is another of the anti-regime Iranian discussion forums in English, together with daneshjoo.org mentioned earlier. By September 2004, the blog actually carried an ad for georgewbush.com, the official re-election website for the current US President, “Paid for by BUSH-CHENEY '04, Inc”. This is quite remarkable, given that Mr. Bush has declared the Islamic Republic of Iran a part of his “Axis of Evil”, and is hardly a good friend of the government in Iran. The weblog has a “comments” option, but not many comments have been submitted. The first post, according to the archives, was made at the 15<sup>th</sup> of January 2004.

*Wednesday, May 05, 2004*

*VOA*

*I listen to VOA (Voice of America) almost everyday during these recent years. I think the interviews and programs of voice of America are about the exact problems of Iran. I would like to thank people who work there: Mr. Baharloo, Mr. Ramesh, and Mrs. Hamideh, Mr. Abbasi, Mr. Ebrahim Biparva and all who I don't remember their names. "Thank you"*

*Sunday, March 28, 2004*

*Kazemi Petition: Expel Islamic Clerical Regime of Iran from The UN For Killing a Canadian Photojournalist, and Call For Free Referendum In Iran!*

*Stephan Hachemi demands that the Mafia Regime returns the body of his Mother who was tortured to death by the Islamic Mafia Clerics. The Tyrannical Murderers are attempting to play Islamic Clerics games and bury her body in Iran in an attempt to hide evidence of their crimes.*

*Tuesday, April 13, 2004*

*A blog about Iran with American authors from Iran.<sup>35</sup>*

<http://tehranpacer.blogdrive.com/>

The author of this weblog is not directly identified, but in his first post, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January 2004, he describes himself as a "young Iranian journalist". There is no permanent link section, but he does link from his posts to weblogs by Outsiders such as Hoder. This blog has not been updated since the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2004. It illustrates the difficulty in predicting which weblogs will be active in the future. It is also one of the reasons why I have added brief descriptions of a few more weblogs by Insiders, in addition to the ten I originally selected. To compensate for any possible lack of updates on the main list.

*Saturday, January 24, 2004*

*Request for correction...*

*Hello Mr. Derakhshan*

*Thank you because adding Tehran Pacer to the list of BlogsByIranians. But there is some information wrong about identity of writer of Tehran Pacer. One of my friends whose name is Hadi has signed up in Blogdrivefor a blog which was called Tehran Walker and we decided to make this weblog a cybernetic place for people –particularly youth people- of Tehran to share their experience of pacing in Tehran. After that, my friend Hadi mailed to you to ask you for adding this site to your list of Blogsbyiranians.*

*Thursday, January 22, 2004<sup>36</sup>*

*'Jeegar' vs. political freedoms*

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<sup>35</sup> In this post is a link to [viewfromiran.blogspot.com](http://viewfromiran.blogspot.com), another Insider weblog, described here later.

<sup>36</sup> This story is linked to and taken from the weblog by Outsider Hoder.

*If you need a proof that Iranian youngsters don't have any interest in politics, you must see this stats report for the most popular Iranian websites.*

*You see that a website called Jeegar is on the top with over 100,000 visitors everyday. Its content: links to mainly soft porn material on the Net. The next website is Gooya, a simple but old and lucky directory of popular Iranian websites; next is Baztab, a political news website close to the center of the right; then is Dalghak, an entertainment portal without any particular content; and Gooya News is next which is the most popular news site close to the reformists and the left in general, with only 30,000 visitors.*

*Looking at the details of Jeegar.com's stats report, there is no doubt in my mind that what the young Iranian wants is not necessarily an open, transparent government. They need to have fun like all other people in their age group in the World.*

<http://viewfromiran.blogspot.com/>

This weblog is started by two persons, identified as: "Two partners, four nationalities, 2 religions, opposing politics, several cultures, and a digital camera". They have a contact email, responses@gmail.com. Apart from that, they are both anonymous, only signing with their initials. "K" seems to be a man, while "TE" is a woman. At least one of them must be American, judging from their writings. They also seem to have some Dutch connections. The first post in the archives is listed from the 10<sup>th</sup> of June, 2003. Their posts are often stories or small essays, describing glimpses of every day life in Iran. TE especially provides interesting insight into the world of Iranian women. They do write about stories from Western newspapers sometimes, and even link to them. They appear to have had easy access to non-Iranian and Western media, and make many references to these. All the latest postings are signed by TE. The blog was quiet during the summer of 2004. Up until then, updates had been fairly frequent, every few days. New posts started appearing in September.

*Tuesday, September 07, 2004*

*I might actually start writing again. Until then, check out this article:*

*Bad Jens - Iranian Feminist Journal: "Performance in Everyday Life and the Rediscovery of the 'Self' in Iranian Weblogs"*

*Tuesday, May 25, 2004*

*Marmulak is the Persian word for lizard. It is also, by far, the most popular movie in Iran. It is Iran's Shrek 2. Everyone we meet in Iran is talking about the movie. "I had to wait 2 hours for a ticket," one of our young friends told us. "But it was great. The best movie of the year. No doubt."*

*From what I can gather, Marmulak is a series of comic sketches that poke fun at Iran's clerics. K and I tried to see it last week, but the line for tickets stretched several blocks. Last week was supposed to be the last night of the movie. The government belatedly decided to pull it from the theaters. "It is a symbolic gesture," K's nephew told me. If Khorramabadis are making jokes at the expense of the clerics, the film has already permeated every level of society.*

*You can get bootleg copies of the film at stores all over Iran. Some are even selling the uncensored version, which many of the people we spoke with saw. "It has 20 more minutes of uncensored comedy," K's brother told us. "You have to see it."*

*One should not make the mistake of thinking that just because Iranians are laughing at their clerics that they have lost their faith in Islam. Praise for the film has come from some of our most religious friends. K's sister, who is a believer, loved the movie. Iranians, I think, have lost faith in their clerical elite and in the utopian vision of an Islamic society. All well and good I think.*

*Friday, June 20, 2003*

*June 20, 2003*

*Arak*

*I have seen more things in the last two days here in Iran than in 2 years in Amsterdam. I am definitely overwhelmed. I am also outraged. I am like the newscaster in the beautiful film called "Network." I want to open the window of my mother's house and put my head out and scream, "I'm mad as hell, and I can't take it any more!"*

*The state of the Islamic republic of Iran sucks.*

*This is the first time I am writing to you from Iran, so let me please say this: this government is corrupt, unimaginative, and old-fashioned in the worst way. It is a powerful and growing cancer which forces its victims to give up first before it will take the last breath out of their bodies. Unfortunately a lot of Iranians like to be victims and are still waiting for god, in the form of Uncle Sam, to come and free them. They make the argument that Germany, Italy, Japan, and others were freed from evil governments with the help of Uncle Sam. We are not better than G I Joe. I have heard this argument from neo-conservatives in the US too.*

*Let me tell you one experience. It took us another 2 hours to get the Iranian travelers checks. This process will take me only 10 minutes on a very busy day in any bank in Amsterdam. The lesson here is that you will not get any work done unless you beg or bribe. You have to be super human to be able to stay cool and live under these conditions in Iran. Life in Iran will break you one way or another. It has its daily painful effect on my dearest people in the world: my family. I am in constant pain since I came here to see my family living this way. My 8 year old niece is wearing a veil, and when I said, "You are just 8 years old, and it is night, you don't need that," she answered, "But my father gets upset if I don't wear it." I know her father better than I know myself. There is nothing Islamic about him. He is just sick of protest. He has given up on changing his life, and I am not sure if he sees any changes for his kids. I know this is what the hardliners in Iran want: to make you worth nothing, with no desire for a better life, no hope for change, and more importantly, no power to make change. I know you get stuck here, and you want to get out.*

*Saturday, January 31, 2004*

*Obviously, this is what you want to read if you want to follow the political crisis in Iran:- Iranian Truth <sup>37</sup>*

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<sup>37</sup> Here is a link to Outsider weblog [iraniantruth.blogspot.com](http://iraniantruth.blogspot.com), mentioned later in this thesis.

<http://yaserb.blogspot.com/>

Yaser's location is in Tehran, where he is a 20-year-old student of microbiology in the "worst university in the world. Azad University." He apologizes for his lack of English skills, and says that one of his goals for writing this blog, which has been operating since April 2004, is "improving my English." He states a contact email address: Yasget@gmail.com . The weblog has no permanent links, but many internal post links to the BBC, Yahoo! and the New York Times, or weblogs by Outsiders such as Hoder and blogsbyiranians.com. There is a "comments" possibility, but it is not much used.

*Monday, September 20, 2004*

*IRIB vs. Google*

*Yesterday IRIB (Iran TV) show a strange report about Google .it was strange but was silly too.*

*The reporter said that Google have strong connection and relation with intelligence services .these are reasons for this allegation:*

*It said Gmail is an expensive service but it is free so it means CIA is behind it.*

*At the last and the most funny reason the reporter siad that recently Google got rid of his advertisement on blogspot so CIA increases its budget.*

*I Live IN IRAN*

*Monday, July 19, 2004*

*Iran a far away island*

*Censor in Iran theses days are more than before*

*They bought a new and powerful software from U.S.A that worth 7 million \$ for filtering in internet(I wish they spend this money for providing high speed internet for Iranian instead of this software ).*

*Now I am understanding why they did not do any thing to bring high speed internet for Iranian .in their ideas internet is a bad thing and disturbing tool that they forgot forbidden it but now they decide to eliminate it .maybe they think internet speed is height in Iran .*

*They also forbidden using satellite .u as an Iranian has to watch what they want*

*I think all of u know about closing newspaper in Iran these days. They again closed 2 reformist newspaper last day (VAGHAYEH JOMHOURIAT) .they were new reformist newspaper that they published maximum for only 50 days. Some says these newspapers closed because that did not want reformist news paper can publish nesses about ZAHRA KAZEMI trial.*

*I think now u can understand that they want preserving us like a "Robinson "in a far island.*

### **7.1.1 Additional weblogs by Insiders:**

As mentioned before, I have been reading many more weblogs than listed here. Since blogs by Insiders are the primary focus of this master thesis, I will include a very brief description

of a few more weblogs here, in addition to the ten first included. This is also in part to compensate for the fact that some weblogs turned out to be less useful than hoped for, because of few updates during the period April to September 2004. I have singled out posts referring to attempts of Internet censorship, if these are reflected in the writings on some blogs by Insiders.

<http://iraniandoughter.blogspot.com/>

This female blogger signs all her posts with the name “eftekhar”, and has the contact email iraniandoughter@yahoo.com . The blog is about “thoughts, diary, and history of Esfahan”. Apart from that, she keeps a low profile. Maybe she is not entirely anonymous, as she indicates in her writing that her brothers may know she is blogging. The blog is updated every week or less. She does have a “comments” and trackback option, but they are not much used. She has permanent links to the BBC, CNN and Hoder. Judging from the archives section, she has blogged since April 2003

*Friday, June 25, 2004*

*It is a long time that I could not write any thing in my web log!*

*Because unfortunately some sensorship were considered about web logs in Iran!*

*I am not sure when we can be free from the all sensorship!*

<http://persianlaic.blogspot.com/>

This blog, dating from September 2003, is rarely updated, last time in July 2004. The author links to BBC Persian, and to many weblogs, also by Outsiders. It has a “comments” option, but few comments have actually been submitted.

*Thursday, July 08, 2004*

*Zoroastrian's Museum Fundless to Buy Historical Letters Letters written 150 years ago by a Zoroastrian merchant from his commercial firm in Bombay to Iran during the Qajar dynasty have been offered to Zoroastrians' Anthropology Museum in Kerman Province, but it could not afford it and the seller is not willing to sell them the National Document Archives.*

*These notes and letters, mostly dealing with his trade accounts, are sent by Mullah Bagher Goshtasb to his relatives living in Kerman. “Since the Zoroastrians' museum has not enough funds to buy them, we proposed to buy their photocopied versions for equivalent of \$120, but the seller turned it down,” said Mehran Gheibi, director of the poorly-funded museum. “The letters are presumed to have been written during the reign of Naserul-Din Shah (1848-96).”*

*Along with Judaism and Christianity, Zoroastrianism is a recognized — and therefore permitted — religion in Iran, where officially 99 percent of the 66 million-strong population are Muslims*

<http://www.20six.co.uk/chackavak>



This blog has got permanent links to Time, CNN and other Western news outlets. The author states several contact emails, both from Hotmail, G-mail, Yahoo! and others.

<http://oxtay2.blogspot.com/>

This blog from December 2003 is by an Iranian from the Turkish minority. He calls himself “oxtay”, and he already has blogs in both Persian and Turkish. “Regretfully that is all I can say about my self for now making sure that my privacy doesn't get lost!” There is a permanent link to Google News. The author makes few posts and irregular updates., but gives internal links to the New York Times, The Lemonde Diplomatique, and MSN News as late as June 24, 2004. He links to Outsider Hoder’s blog on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September, about the recent crackdown on reformist websites within Iran. In addition to this, there is a link to Hoder’s Persian blog. The blog has a “comments” option, but it is not used.

<http://www11.brinkster.com/ganymede/>

The author has several permalinks, mainly to other weblogs. They include prominent Outsiders like Persian Students in the UK, IranianTruth, and Hoder’s Persian blog, and BlogsByIranians.com. The archives section goes back to July 2003. There are many photos posted, that reveal some interest in architecture. The blogger appears to be in the process of building a house. He gives internal links in his posts to Western news outlets even after the crackdown in June, including the BBC at the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 2004.

<http://nima-mofid.blogspot.com/>

This weblog was established December 2003, and is about “Daily / Weekly notes & pictures of a Persian student named Nima from Iran. Personal ideas about life and everything related.” There are permalinks to Outsiders such as Hoder and blogsbyiranians.com. A contact email, nima\_mofid@yahoo.com , is listed as well. The posts are filled with many pictures, and are not very political. Updates are irregular, and there is no “comments” option.

*July 15 2004*

*Filtering seems to be growing by the second!<sup>38</sup>*

<http://testfortest.blogspot.com/>

This weblog gives an “artistic” impression, with a lot of photos and poetry. There are no permalinks, and very little personal information about the author. Judging from the archives section, the weblog was established in November 2003.

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<sup>38</sup> Her previous post was from the middle of June, while the crackdown on the Iranian Internet was going on.



*Monday, June 28, 2004*

*The whole blogspot is blocked in my connection from I think 1 or 2 weeks ago so it's hard to read my blog and it's comments and others who are hosted in blogspot...*

*I won't write till I can easily do that ...*

*this is my country and those who are in power think this way works ok! Maybe they are right?!, the time would be the best judge for all of us...*

*Monday, July 05, 2004*

*I'm back, after some searching for an un-filtered connection, after some thinking about writing, after some days of my life passing, after ...*

*I'm back*

*Last post:*

*Monday, August 02, 2004*

*I really don't like to write here any more, although it's a hard decision and I feel so uncomfortable and although I don't know how long I can keep it, I'm here to say : I won't write any more  
any last reflection?!*

<http://blog.medyadaily.com/>

The author of this blog is an Iranian Kurd. He has got some permalinks, but not many to Westerners or to Western media. Most of them are to Kurds and Kurdish resources. The blog is updated maybe once weekly, but is irregular.

*Wednesday, August 18, 2004*

*Let Defend Kurdish Language*

*and and and, now ! I just want to start learning Kurdish completely, I feel shame as a Kurd, that I can't speak my native language well ! (well I never had chance to learn it) here most of the youngster Kurds, use a lot of Farsi and Arabic words ! and thats so bad .*

*in fact they can't even speak Farsi (or Arabic) well . I remember, when I went to Azad University test with my Kermashani (a Kurdish city) freind in Tehran, when we took a taxi, the driver immediately said "are you Kurd?" LOL*

*Well , I think we youngster Kurds are the only people in the world, that can't speak any any language perfectly! in fact we have no first language !*

*Kurdish language is a survivor of Arabs attacks to Iran empire !*

*(Arabs forbidden speaking and writing except in Arabic for 200 years in Iran, but they couldn't defeat Kurds)*

*unfortunately , everyday, more people forget more Kurdish words .*

*In Kermanshah ! that is a Kurdish City, you can hardly find a young person speak Kurdish ! and they hardly even call themselves KURD ! what a pain ! what a shame ! I can't bear this .*

## 7.2 Weblogs by Outsiders, Iranians in exile:

<http://fassihi.blogspot.com/>

Amir A Fassihi's Journal, and "Thoughts on politics, economics and current events with a focus on Iran and the Middle East." The weblog was started in January 2004. It does not have any permanent links, and just a few internal links in posts to other media or blogs. A "comments" section dates back to May. It does have some comments, and some of them appear to be from Iranians in Iran. A few of the posts at the blog are also made in Persian, as well as English. The blog gives good insight into and analysis of Iranian politics. The updates were done quite frequently in the beginning, irregular during the summer, and then became more frequent again in August.

*Thursday, July 22, 2004*

*Sanctions vs Dialogue, Which Path to Take?*

*Ali N ) said...*

*hi mr fasihi  
i am ali n from iran . i know your blog throgh shahrzad entry about you .  
i study medicine here and i wana continue my field in canada or usa .  
my sister sepideh lives in portland oregon . and her husband workes in intel  
company . i really want to have closser relationship or we can call friendship with you  
. so plz take a look to my blog Hezar Harfe Nagofteh with this url:  
<http://alinonline.blogspot.com>*

*good luck  
Ali N*

<http://freethoughts.org/>

This weblog is updated about biweekly, and has a contact email: free@freethoughts.com . It seems to be a community weblog, as a long list of Iranians in North America is stipulated as "Contributing Authors". According to information stated on the home page, "Free Thoughts on Iran (FToI) is the collective project of a group of Iranian students practicing the formulation and expression of their diverse opinions." The authors receive many comments on some of the posts, but it is hard to determine where all of them are from.

*July 09, 2004*

*July 9, 1999 (18 Tir, 1378 in Persian calendar, this year on July 8) was a day of shock and disbelief in the student community of Iran and the society at large. Upon a demonstration in protest to the banning of the pro-reform newspaper Salâm the para-military vigilantes supporting the conservatives' agenda and the police broke into the dormitories of Tehran University, smashed the doors, shattered the windows, tore*

*apart the furniture, brutalized the students and throw some of them out the broken windows. The building looked as if it was hit by a ballistic missile. According to unofficial reports, more than ten people died in the clash, although the official death toll was later announced to be one unfortunate guest who had "fallen" down the window was "suspiciously shot in the head." All this happened at dawn on a Friday, the official weekend holiday with no newspapers to cover the story. The national TV, under the supreme leader's supervision, did not broadcast any reports of the events till the night after when it briefly mentioned "the unrests after an illegal gathering of students."*

<http://www.hoder.com/weblog/>

“My name is Hossein Derakhshan (aka Hoder). I was born in Tehran, Iran and I'm now living in Toronto, Canada since Dec. 2000. This is my weblog in English which does not necessarily cover the same topics as my Persian weblog. The title of these weblogs, "Editor: Myself", clearly displays my motives to start blogging. To contact me, please use: [hoder@hoder.com](mailto:hoder@hoder.com) .“ The first post of this weblog was written on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2002, according to the archives. Hoder's blog is an extremely active and updated weblog, with a great deal of links to Iranian bloggers, media and bloggers in general. It has a “comments” section and a trackback option. He does have a significant amount of comments on certain posts, but most of these seem to be from non-Iranians, judging by the names, or from Outsiders. But is sometimes hard to tell. They all have to leave an email address to post, but can of course make a fake one.

*September 14, 2004*

*Internet: Iran's Most Trusted Medium*

*Results of a recent interesting poll shows why hardline conservatives are so determined to shut down opposition websites.*

*According to ISNA, the nation-wide poll shows that among various media, people have the most trust in the internet (45.5%), followed by Iranian TV and Radio (43.7%), satellite channels (25.2%), press (23%), and foreign-based radios (20%).*

*This could partly explain the recent aggressive crack down on reformist news websites.*

*August 10, 2004*

*Filtering effect: Losing 1,500 visitor in a night*

*After writing a couple of posts about the nuclear issue in Iran and urging Iranian citizens to talk and think about it despite the strong control of the regime on this issue, my Persian weblog has apparently blocked in more ISPs.*

*I've received several emails and comments, mostly from outside Tehran, that they can't access Editor: Myself anymore since yesterday.*

*As a result, I've lost some 1,500 visitors per day. However, alternative domains, which is one of the most effective ways to beat censorship, are still available, such as*

*editormyself.com. But every alternative domain name costs up to \$10 and I'm not sure how long I can continue to pay for it by my own.*

*So, if you don't me to lose the remaining 4,500 visitors to my Persian blog and help it reach back to its 10,000 normal visits per day, please make a donation by clicking on the following button.*

*June 13, 2004*

#### *Iran Filtered Blogspot*

*Apparently Iranian Telecom and some other ISPs have filtered all Blogspot subdomains. Many users have confirmed it.*

*Update: Mehdi, a blogger from Qum, has confirmed it in his blog, among others.*

*June 16, 2004*

#### *Latest Version of The Blacklist*

*One of my readers who says is an administrator of an ISP in Tehran, has sent the latest version of the blacklist Iranian Telecom has sent out to all ISPs.*

*Apparently this list only includes websites and weblogs in Persian language. There are CDs regularly sent out to ISPs that contain thousands of erotic websites in English that are not politically of much significance.*

*The new list includes many news websites not necessarily related to radical and violent opposition groups, as well as many entertainment websites, weblogs, and some erotic blogs and websites.*

*I'd try to mark the major news websites among them.*

*Comments:*

*Dear hosein*

*you r so hard-working student because you are trying to help your countrymen besid you studying . thank you . if it's possible for you please come and see ( [intstory.blogspot.com](http://intstory.blogspot.com)) . it is memorabilia of one of iranian harlots . the manager of this weblog has a problems in her comments as so on . please come and persuade them to continue their activity . you know , its a live history of our country and by your encouregment and your help it can be continued . this is nice story .I put a comment in their weblog and gave them an offer to ask you to help . best regard . esmaeil - tehran  
Posted by esmaeil at June 22, 2004 01:48 AM*

<http://iraniantruth.blogspot.com/>

The weblog contains plenty of permanent links, both to Iranian English weblogs by Insiders and Outsiders, Persian weblogs, English language media and a few others. It has got both “comments” and trackback options. The number of comments varies, from zero to five or more. It appears that it is not just one person, but small group of Iranian Americans writing at this blog. Not all of them write under their full names, but rather attach their signatures or

nicknames to each post, like “Nema” and “Mohammad Kazerouni”. “Nema” seems to be particularly active. They read and quote blogs by Insiders, like this one from the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2004:

*Wednesday, June 23, 2004*

#### *Coverage of Recent Events*

*The Brooding Persian has the best summary of current ongoings and thoughts about the capture of British soliders in Iran and the "summer crackdown." In fact, he has some of the best analysis on Iranian blogs and ought to be a daily read. Check it out.*  
*Nema*

*Thursday, May 13, 2004*

#### *Blogs and Freedom*

*There's something within this article (brought to my attention by Hoder) that certainly rings a bell with me. Specifically this line:*

*[Sina Motallebi] from Teheran wrote for the newspaper "Hayat é NO" over politics, culture, computer. And which could not be printed also in reform-oriented newspapers, it had published Rooznegar "in its Blog". Motallebi: "in my Web log I felt free."*

*Can any of us express anything different. To blog in a sense does mean to be free. It means to share one's thought with the world and allowing others to respond. It is dialogue as its finest. It is Mill's conception of a "marketplace of idea" in a way and manner that he surely could not have expected. To say that one is free in his blog, is indefinitely, an understatement of the euphoric calm of expression which makes thought, knowledge, and consciousness so fundamental to our existence.*

<http://www.iransarai.blogspot.com/>

“This blog is about any thing related to Iran plus any other interesting things.” Contact email stated: davidfard@gmail.com .” It has irregular updates, and the first post in the archives dates from the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 2002. There are permalinks to some blogs, mainly by Iranian Outsiders, but also to Insiders. There has been a “comments” option available since May, but none have been submitted yet. Many of the posts are highly political, and extremely critical of the regime in Iran.

*Sunday, September 12, 2004*

#### *Hostage Taking*

*Once again Mullahs provided evidence that they have no respect to human rights and even to their own flawed laws. They have arrested a 62 years old man, the father of a well-known journalist and blogger, Sina Motallebi, in order to suppress his son and force him to shut his mouth up. Two weeks ago, Sina warned Iranian internet activists of regime's aim on cracking down political websites and arresting their writers and providers. A few days after his caution, Islamic regime arrested three journalists and webloggers.*

*After banning tens of newspapers and putting many journalists in jail, Mullahs drove their attention toward the internet. They initiated by filtering the popular websites and web logs but because of their poor knowledge and massive capability of internet, they did not succeed. Now they are trying to harass the people, internet users and activists. They started with established and popular sites. Sina and his web log are renowned among the Iranian internet users. He is the first weblogger who was arrested and interrogated, a year and half ago for his articles, published on his web log. Living in Holland freely encouraged him to be more frank and outspoken. He revealed the details of his detention and behavior of his interrogators and warned the others to be more cautious. It's clear that Mullahs would not tolerate him. Not being able to get to Sina they took his father as a hostage. Unfortunately, he is not in good health and his life is highly at risk in the hands of inhuman Mullahs.*

<http://irte.blogspot.com/>

Iran-Testimony is about "Human Rights News from Iran." Hossein Mahoutiha, the Coordinator of the Iranian Human Rights Activists Groups in EU and North America, states his email address as: hmahoutiha@videotron.ca . According to the information, he lives in Hasselby, Sweden.

This is a special kind of weblog, and shows flexibility of the genre. It looks like two persons are the primary responsible for posting and maintaining the blog, as all posts have the signatures "ihrg" or a few "posted by irte". There are no permanent links to any other blogs or media, but to Human Rights organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters Without Borders. In addition to this, there are some links to other Human Rights groups in Europe and North America dealing with Iran and Iranians. However, these "links" only contain a contact email to the different groups, not a website. The posts do have internal links to blogs such as Hoder and StopCensoringUs, Iranian Diaspora news like IranMania and Payvand.com, Voice Of America, The Toronto Star, Reuters, CNN and others. There is a "comments" option available for each post, but very little used. Blog archives start at November 2003. The blog is updated several times per week, but sometimes irregular. All submissions deal with Human Rights violations in The Islamic Republic of Iran, one way or the other.

*Friday, March 12, 2004*

*UN report slams Iran's systematic repression*

*GENEVA - A UN expert has warned that systematic repression is creating a climate of fear in Iran, where hardliners have gained a stranglehold over government and the judiciary in the country. The UN expert underlined that there was a "climate of fear induced by the systematic repression of people expressing critical views against the authorised political and religious doctrine and the functioning of institutions".*

<http://www.myiran.org/>

“Comments on human rights, politics and other issues related to modern Iran.” Not too frequently updated. The blog does have a “comments” option, but almost none are submitted. Not too much personal information is given about the author of the weblog, but he links to his Persian twin site.

*Friday, August 06, 2004*

*New attacks to Democracy*

*Recently, Mortazavi, Tehran General Prosecutor!, closed two more daily journals (Vaghaye ETefaghieh and Jomhouriat) because of their full coverage on the Zahra Kazemi's court. They added them to the list of around 100 banned journals during last 4 years. it was interesting that there is no legal ground, even based on the current primitive press law, to stop them but he closed them reasoning that some of the journalists working in these two newspapers were working previously for other banned newspapers.  
for more information click here.<sup>39</sup>*

*Saturday, April 24, 2004*

*A Letter to The leader*

*The Iranian Journalists Association(IJA) wrote a letter to the leader asking about what he did to journalists and news papers during the last fifteen years of power. IJA in its letter pointed to the mass violation of human rights by the judiciary which is controled by the leader, especially in recent years. They pointed also to the illigal closure of more than 100 press in last 8 years which is a record in the world. They bravely asked him to explain about imprisoning many journalists.*

<http://www.pejmanesque.com/>

A large and professional-looking blog, with daily updates. Most posts are not specifically Iran-related, but some are. The others are about foreign affairs, politics, entertainment etc, in a traditional “blog” mix. The archives section is divided into categories, in which “Iran” is one of the largest, with more than 400 entries. The posts about Iran contain pretty ruthless criticism of Human Rights violations and abuse of power by the mullahs in the Islamic Republic, as well as considerable amounts of ridicule. The comments seem to be mainly from non-Iranians, but it is again hard to say for sure whether or not there are Iranian Insiders writing as well.

*August 15, 2004*

*REVENGE OF THE BUSYBODIES*

*THE Greek organizers of this summer's Olympics, which began in Athens yesterday, claim that more women athletes are competing than ever before. Seen from the Muslim world, however, the Athens game will look like a male-dominated spectacle in which*

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<sup>39</sup> Here is a link to a report at the Reporters Without Borders, RSF:  
[http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id\\_article=11106](http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=11106)



*women play an incidental part. According to officials in Athens, the number of Muslim women participating in this year's game is the lowest since 1960. Several Muslim countries have sent no women athletes at all; others, such as Iran, are taking part with only one, in full hijab. And state-owned TV networks in many Muslim countries, including Iran and Egypt, have received instructions to limit coverage of events featuring women athletes at Athens to a minimum.*

<http://www.persianstudents.org/>

This “Community Weblog of Persian Students in the UK” has got permalinks to many weblogs by Iranians, both in English and in Persian. This includes a few Insiders. The weblog is a “community weblog” by several students from different Universities across the UK. Still, it retains a “personal” touch, with some posts about “movies I have watched recently”, fashion or other trivia. There is a significant number of comments on some of the threads, but most of them seem to be from others Iranian students in the UK or Outsiders. A few of them are hard to place, and may come from Insiders, though. Each post comes with the “signature” of the person who made it: Unity, Mehdi Yahyaei, West Ender, Parthisan etc. The Community Weblog was born on the 19<sup>th</sup> of May 2003.

*June 08, 2004*

*06:32 PM (GMT)*

*The Telecommunication Company of Iran has officially announced that they will continue to close down ISPs and ICPs with Internet-phone service until they solve the issues of internet filtering and VoIP. While the number of telephone landlines has tripled between 1997 and 2002, the revenue of the Telecom Company has fallen from \$20 million profit to –\$32 million loss; and the Telecom Company points at VoIP service providers as the ones who have caused this loss with their cheap international telephone services.*

<http://zaneirani.blogspot.com/>

Iranian Woman: “As a human rights activist, I find it difficult to ignore the torture and executions of fellow humans...as a woman, mother, lover, wife, daughter, and sister I find it disturbing to observe other women's sufferings. I write for I and I only and I invite you to read my blog.” There is a contact email stated: [IranianWoman@hotmail.com](mailto:IranianWoman@hotmail.com). Judging from the information she reveals in her writings, the blogger is an Iranian lady, Sheema Kalbasi, who now appears to be living in Denmark. Even though she is not anonymous, she still keeps a low profile, and signs her posts only with “posted by WishMeLuck”. The weblog has quite frequent updates, almost daily. It contains poems, but also prose comments about Human Rights violations in Iran.

*Friday, September 17, 2004*

*Stop Such and Such Crimes...*

*When you read about the murderess and serial killers in the West, you think to yourself how can one person commit "such" crimes- to slash another human's throat or choke*



*someone to death. When "such" acts are done collectively by regimes "such" as the Iranian government, the criminals are rewarded by the European countries, get recognition by the Islamic nations and ridiculously threatened by the poorly organized opposition groups outside the country.*

*These powerful-dragonhead-men will never get arrested or persecuted and punished for their crimes against humanity. They continue arresting; executing their victims and the rest of the nation is choked to limpness! The recent arrests of Motallebi (a film maker,) and three other journalist/ poet/ bloggers are only some examples of the ongoing crimes committed by the regime in Iran.*

*My blog is the journal of my thoughts, my life... free...uncensored, most of the time not even edited...now I don't know if I can continue writing. The truth is I don't want him to know of what is happening in my life!*

### **7.3 Summary, and conclusion about weblog findings**

My active tracking of these mentioned weblogs stretched from the spring of 2004 to the early fall of 2004, or from about April to the middle of September, although references have been made to archived posts from earlier than this. According to information available from such sources as the Reporters Without Borders, the OpenNet Initiative and StopCensoringUs, the regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran staged a major crackdown on Freedom of Speech on the Internet in Iran during the summer of 2004, with increased censorship especially noticeable in June. Although the bulk of this censorship may have been aimed at the Persian language websites, there are strong indications that it affects my group of English language weblogs, too. Out of the main selection of ten weblogs by Insiders, eight or nine were active during the bulk of this period. Of these, six of them – a majority – make clear and direct references or comments to Internet censorship during the summer of 2004. One of them, IranDiaries, posts a complaint about increased censorship on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June, and the author appears to have abandoned the blog after this. Whether or not this is due to more censorship is hard to say for sure, but it could be an indication of it. Several of the “additional” weblogs by Insiders also make clear references to increased censorship.

In addition to this, several of the important Outsiders post comments about an ongoing crackdown on the Internet in the Islamic Republic. A famous blogger such as Hossein Derakhshan complains about losing thousands of visitors, perhaps the majority of the about 10.000 daily visitors he used to have before the summer of 2004. This sudden, dramatic drop overlaps exactly in time with the increased censorship efforts in Iran, and it is highly likely that they are related.

As for communication between weblogs by Insiders and Outsiders, or Iranians in Iran and Iranians in exile, there is plenty of evidence of significant cross-linking between them, at least of permanent links. There are some slight indications of comments being made on each others weblogs, but the last part only sparingly and difficult to verify, as most of those who comment do not mention their geographic location, and many blogs do not have very active “comments” sections. When it comes to internal links in posts by Insiders to Outsiders, there

is ample evidence of this before the crackdown this summer. Some of the Insiders do make references to Outsiders even as late as July, August and September of 2004, and have links to non-censored Western or non-Iranian media. This strongly suggests that the censorship efforts of the Iranian regime, although maybe more noticeable, are not 100 per cent effective. Still, the material is not sufficient to determine exactly how extensive these contacts between English language weblogs are after the increased censorship.

There are some indications that bloggers inside Iran tend to be more anonymous and reveal less about their actual identity than Outsiders, but the difference is by no means clear-cut. The majority of the Insiders appear to be fully or partly anonymous, typically posting a contact email address and giving some personal information, but not enough to identify any specific individual. Bloggers like Iranian-Girl and Brooding.Persian have posts including harsh criticism not only of the mullahs and the regime in the Islamic Republic, but occasionally even of Islam itself. In today's non-democratic Iran, where Hardliners and conservatives still are powerful, such remarks in the open can be dangerous. It is therefore highly likely that at least some of the bloggers use anonymity as a shield against reactions and reprisals for politically sensitive remarks. However, a journalist and activist like Omid Memarian is remarkably open about his identity, and even posts his photo on the blog's home page. Hassan Ghandian's tahdabir.blogspot features an ad to the re-election campaign of US President George W. Bush, a sworn enemy of the Islamic regime, and head of state of a nation usually referred to as "The Great Satan" by Iranian Hardliners. Some of the Outsiders, such as MyIran.org, also do not reveal too much about themselves.

Briefly summed up, I find evidence that the censorship of Iranian English language weblogs has increased during my study period, and is more noticeable by September than it was in April. This corresponds to a period of crackdowns on the Internet in general in Iran, not just weblogs or English language websites. As I finished my examinations about the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, there were rumors on some weblogs by Outsiders that the Iranian regime was considering launching an "intranet" for Iran. Persons involved in some Persian language opposition websites within Iran have also been arrested in recent weeks, indicating that the crackdown on Internet liberties was still going on when this master thesis was completed. However, several of the blogs by Insiders I followed continued to link to Western news and websites critical of the Iranian regime even after the crackdown, indicating that although censorship may have increased, it is by no means 100 per cent effective.

## **8. Synopsis of thesis**

To sum up the arguments presented in this thesis, there is little doubt that some of the most optimistic expectations to the Internet in the 1990s were unfounded and exaggerated. The Internet is not a magic vessel, and it does not exist in a political and cultural vacuum. Even though the information available on the Internet cannot be controlled, the points of access to it can, to some extent, as can the individuals who use it be intimidated and discouraged from seeking it out. Just because the Internet contains the potential for the democratization of information does not mean that this is an inevitable result of the ongoing development in a given country. Nations such as China and Singapore have demonstrated that authoritarian regimes do not necessarily lose their grip of power by introducing the Internet.

However, despite the fact that the Internet's potential for creating change may have been overrated, this does in no way indicate that it has to be negligible. Michael Chase and James Mulvenon point out the possibility that the Internet can facilitate democratization at a slower pace, which does not have to be inferior to quicker and more dramatic changes. Shanthi Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas suggest something similar, with the Internet playing a significant, but perhaps not stellar role in changing authoritarian states. The window of opportunity the Internet provides is perhaps not as wide-open as was hoped for in the early years. But there is still enough room for change to slip through.

My active tracking of this selection of weblogs stretched from the spring of 2004 to the early fall of 2004, or from about April to the middle of September. I found evidence that the censorship of Iranian English language weblogs has increased during my study period, and is more noticeable by September than it was in April. The majority of the blogs by Insiders I studied made clear references to incidents of more censorship and blocking of websites. In addition to this, several of the important Outsiders I visited posted comments about an ongoing crackdown on the Internet in the Islamic Republic, and some reported a sudden drop in daily visitors. There are some indications that bloggers inside Iran tend to be more anonymous and reveal less about their actual identity than Outsiders, but the difference is by no means clear-cut. The majority of the Insiders appear to be fully or partly anonymous, typically posting a contact email address and giving some personal information, but not enough to identify any specific individual. It is likely that at least some of the bloggers use anonymity as a shield against reactions and reprisals for politically sensitive remarks. As for communication between weblogs by Insiders and Outsiders, or Iranians in Iran and Iranians in exile, there is plenty of evidence of significant cross-linking between them, at least of permanent links. Some of the Insiders do make references and internal links to Outsiders even as late as July, August and September of 2004, and have links to non-censored Western or non-Iranian media. This strongly indicates that the censorship efforts of the Iranian regime, although maybe more noticeable, are not 100 per cent effective. Blogger Hossein Derakhshan suggests that a large part of his readership in Iran know how to use proxies and other techniques to get around censorship, and estimates that the crackdown has affected 30 to 40 percent of the Iranians in Iran who used to read his weblog.<sup>40</sup> Although this number is impossible for me to verify, it does not sound unreasonable.

This master thesis is not a study of the Internet in Iran. Rather, it is a case study of a sample within a specific type of websites, English language weblogs, over a limited period of time. Generalizing from the samples to the universe is not the goal with case studies. Weblogs only form one small segment of the whole Internet, and blogs by Iranians in English form a small minority of this segment. It is risky to extrapolate any conclusions drawn from such a small percentage of the whole structure. In addition to this, it is quite possible that the censorship situation in Iran for Persian language websites, which of course form the vast majority for Iranians, is different from that of English language ones. In other words, my findings do not have to correspond to those of other types of websites, and in other languages. However, reports from several reliable sources elsewhere suggest they do, and that the study period of this thesis corresponds with a period of crackdowns on the Internet in general in Iran, not just weblogs or English language websites. According to information available from such sources as the Reporters Without Borders, the OpenNet Initiative and StopCensoringUs, the regime in the Islamic Republic of Iran staged a major crackdown on Freedom of Speech on the Internet in Iran during the summer of 2004, with increased censorship especially noticeable in June.

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<sup>40</sup> See interview with Mr. Derakhshan in the Appendix section

As I finished my examinations about the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, there were rumors on some weblogs by Outsiders that the Iranian regime was considering launching an “intranet” for Iran only. Persons involved in some Persian language opposition websites within Iran have also been arrested in recent weeks, indicating that the crackdown on Internet liberties was still going on when this master thesis was completed. If that is the case, it could mean that the regime in Iran is trying to move in the direction of Far Eastern nations such as China and Singapore, in an attempt to emulate their relative success in controlling the Internet.

Amid this rather negative development, and what may seem like the false hope of freedom of speech created at the introduction of the Internet, some more positive notes should be made. On the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2004, Hossein Derakhshan reported that a nation-wide poll in Iran showed that among various media, people have the most trust in the Internet (45.5%), followed by Iranian TV and Radio (43.7%), satellite channels (25.2%), press (23%), and foreign-based radios (20%).<sup>41</sup> This of course explains why the regime is getting more serious in cracking down upon cyberspace. What is remarkable is that not more than 5-10 per cent of Iranians are active users of the Internet, yet it outranks all other media in trust, including foreign satellite channels, that are illegal, but widely watched. It could be taken as an indication that the Internet, despite censorship efforts, is still seen as the least censored of the available media alternatives.

One final comment: In *New Media in the Muslim World – the Emerging Public Sphere*, Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson writes about how Iranians in exile in the 1970s smuggled audiocassettes – then a new medium – with information, speeches and sermons into Iran. The opposition to the Shahs regime, which culminated in the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, was partly facilitated by small media and new technology, slowly eroding the official censorship. Now, the children and grandchildren of that revolution are challenging the very regime that came into power 25 years ago, using small media and new technology in the shape of weblogs on the Internet. History is not without a sense of irony. And it sometimes repeats itself. Maybe it will do so this time, too?

## **Appendix A:**

### **The definition of a weblog, by Dr Jill Walker, Dept of Humanistic Informatics, University of Bergen:**

[http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog\\_theorising/final\\_version\\_of\\_weblog\\_definition.html](http://huminf.uib.no/~jill/archives/blog_theorising/final_version_of_weblog_definition.html)

Saturday: June 28, 2003  
final version of weblog definition

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<sup>41</sup> <http://hoder.com/weblog/archives/012114.shtml>

This is the definition of "weblog" I've written for the Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, which is forthcoming in 2005. It's limited in size and scope: I had to keep to a maximum of 500 words, including the references, and I wrote it for an encyclopedia of narrative. The asterixes indicate cross references to other entries in the encyclopedia.

UPDATE 22/8: I received some useful feedback from the editors and have revised the definition accordingly. Since there are a lot of links to this post, I'm putting the final, final version here at the top of the post, and the draft I sent the editors in June is still here after the horisontal rule.

## Weblog

A weblog, or \*blog, is a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries arranged in reverse chronological order so the most recent post appears first (see temporal ordering). Typically, weblogs are published by individuals and their style is personal and informal. Weblogs first appeared in the mid-1990s, becoming popular as simple and free publishing tools became available towards the turn of the century. Since anybody with a net connection can publish their own weblog, there is great variety in the quality, content, and ambition of weblogs, and a weblog may have anywhere from a handful to tens of thousands of daily readers.

Examples of the \*genre exist on a continuum from \*confessional, online \*diaries to logs tracking specific topics or activities through links and commentary. Though weblogs are primarily textual, experimentation with sound, \*images, and videos has resulted in related genres such as photoblogs, videoblogs, and audioblogs (see intermediality; media and narrative).

Most weblogs use links generously, allowing readers to follow conversations between weblogs by following links between entries on related topics. Readers may start at any point of a weblog, seeing the most recent entry first, or arriving at an older post via a search engine or a link from another site, often another weblog. Once at a weblog, readers can read on in various orders: chronologically, thematically, by following links between entries or by searching for keywords. Weblogs also generally include a blogroll, which is a list of links to other weblogs the author recommends. Many weblogs allow readers to enter their own comments to individual posts.

Weblogs are serial and cumulative, and readers tend to read small amounts at a time, returning hours, days, or weeks later to read entries written since their last visit. This serial or episodic structure is similar to that found in \*epistolary novels or \*diaries, but unlike these a weblog is open-ended, finishing only when the writer tires of writing (see narrative structure).

Many weblog entries are shaped as brief, independent narratives, and some are explicitly or implicitly fictional, though the standard genre expectation is non-fiction. Some weblogs create a larger frame for the micro-narratives of individual posts by using a consistent rule to constrain their structure or themes (see Oulipo), thus, Francis Strand connects his stories of life in Sweden by ending each with a Swedish word and its translation. Other weblogs connect frequent but dissimilar entries by making a larger narrative explicit: Flight Risk is about an heiress's escape from her family, The Date Project documents a young man's search for a girlfriend, and Julie Powell narrates her life as she works her way through Julia Child's cookbook.

## **Appendix B:**

### **Email interview with Iranian weblogger Hossein Derakhshan**

**What is a weblog, by your definition? The label seems to encompass everything from someone publishing personal photos of her birthday party to large and influential websites with hundreds of thousands of readers?**

- From formal point of view, I think they should be sorted in a reverse chronological way, they should have permanent links. In terms of the style and content they should have an opinion and a point-of-view which most of the times makes them far from objectivity.
- But their content can be anything from a simple diary written for high-school friends and family or social and political commentary written for a much wider and more serious audience. Both of these are weblogs in my opinion, but they serve different purposes. Because weblog is just another tool or medium and it could be used in different ways.

**You have your own weblog, both in English and in Farsi. What is the attraction to weblogs? What is different about weblogs compared to other kinds of websites?**

- First of all, I'm my own editor; nobody can censor me in any way. Second, blogs provide a personal perspective to current news and events, especially now that mainstream media is pretending to be biased, but is deeply commercialized. Third, blogs in closed societies provide a unique chance for improving the freedom of speech and information.

**How many Iranian weblogs are there? How many of these are in English? Are weblogs a significant force in Iran today?**

- There is no accurate measure for that. Yet, PersianBlog which is the main blog provider among Iranians has reported that there are at least 60,000 active weblogs hosted on their servers. Perhaps the number of active and non-active Persian weblogs is three or four times bigger than this number.
- Only about a hundred of them are in English, which are mostly written by Iranian expats.
- In some cases Iranian blogs have been able to affect the outside world in Iran. The most visible ones:
  - They've managed to challenge the Iranian regime's censorship on Internet.
  - They informed the world about several incidents such as the arrest of Sina Motallebi, one of their members and help his freedom, illegitimate parliament elections in different places of Iran.

**For non-Farsi (*Persian is the correct word*) speakers like I: Is there a big difference in the contents between the English and the Farsi weblogs? Are Iranians with English or bilingual weblogs different, politically speaking, from the Farsi-only ones?**

- I really don't know. Because there are so few Iranian blogs in English that makes it difficult to do any sort of comparison based on sampling. But obviously, those who know English are less likely to be conservative or religious in Iran and it's a general fact that can be extended to weblogs as well. So you can't see any sign of the big group of religious and conservative bloggers among the English blogs by Iranians.

**Many of the English weblogs do not seem to be frequently updated. Is this the case with Farsi weblogs, too?**

- Yes, I think it is.

**There seems to have been a crackdown recently on weblogs. Several bloggers inside Iran complain about censorship, and you write on your blog that your readership has dropped significantly. Are the censorship efforts becoming more effective?**

- Yes, they are. Iranian government has officially announced that it has spent \$80 million to develop an effective filtering system. However, a rather big part of the readers now know how to use proxies and other techniques to get around with censorship. But maybe it has affected 30 to 40 percent of the readership.

**You can perhaps be labeled a "cyber-activist", as you partake in different activities and websites concerned with increasing freedom of speech on the Internet, especially for Iranians. What is the motivation behind the work you do?**

- On the one hand I love my country and am really upset about its current situation, in terms of economic, social and political development and social especially when I compare it with the neighboring countries such as Turkey, UAE, etc. All these countries were nothing 25 years ago when Islamic Revolution happened in Iran and they are much more ahead of Iran in any aspect.  
On the other hand, I see Internet as a capable tool which can be exploited for socio-political change, especially in a closed society like Iran where the government has a strong grip on media and therefore on the general debates. My experience on blogs proved to me that even one person can make a big difference using both imagination and new technologies.

**Iran has a very large Diaspora of migrants spread around in Western nations and elsewhere. Judging from the links provided at weblogs by Iranians in Iran, they are able to read blogs by Iranians in exile, like you. Do weblogs function as a channel for contact between Iranians inside and outside Iran?**

- Absolutely. Maybe the first significant bridge that weblogs made was between these two groups who have never been involved in such direct way. (Based on my bridges theory blogs are working as social bridges between various parts of the rapidly changing society of Iran, which has never been this disenfranchised: parents-children, rulers-voters, male-female, expatriates-home inhibitors, etc.)  
Now many expiates who have been away from Iran for years and have had no genuine

understanding of the big changes in the Iranian socio-political arena, can correct their assumptions about the present Iran by reading blogs.

Also those who live in Iran can now really feel how is it like to live in a foreign country, what are its challenges, etc.

**How many Iranians are using the Internet? What is the percentage compared to users of other media, such as satellite TV or radio broadcast from outside Iran? Do most users surf from Internet cafes, or do they have connections at home? Are there restrictions in Iran on who can get access to the Internet?**

- I guess there are about 3.5-4 million. But you should be able to check it.
- I don't know of any research results related to your question.
- No, many have their own PCs at home and many work from the university labs.
- No restriction on *who* can access the Net.

**What is the official position of the IRI regarding the Internet? Do the authorities view it as a threat or a possibility? Do they understand the Internet at all?**

- Yes they do understand it and know its potentials. However we must distinct the more or less reformist government from the rest of regime (Parliament was in the hands of reformists until last year and now hard-line conservatives have 'conquered' it.)
- The government has planned long-term programs to strengthen the infrastructure of the Internet and more generally, Information Technologies. A lot of money has also been specified for developing the IT industry in Iran.
- Conservatives, however, been more persuasive in terms of using the Internet for their own purposes. (All top clerics have websites to communicate with their 'followers') But recently they've found out about the influence of the Net as a medium among middle-class Iranians and therefore have heavily started to crack down on Persian anti-Islamic, and opposition websites. But at the same time, they have launched several news websites, both in English and Persian, to promote their own political agenda – and to show a fake picture about Iran to outside world.

**How, technically, do Iranian authorities try to censor the Internet? How efficient is this compared to countries known to have strict control of Cyberspace, such as China or Singapore, or even Southeast Asian nations?**

- They are trying to centralize the entire bandwidth that is transferred to and from the country so they can control the gateways by installing strong filtering software on them. But since the government simply could not give service to the whole country in the beginning and therefore had allowed many privately-run and owned ISPs to operate everywhere, they now have problems controlling the gateways, especially the down-link which could be done with a simple one-way satellite dish, hard to be tracked by the government.
- Now they regularly send out blacklists of banned websites, which are produced by an official three member committee to ISPs and ask them to ban them however they can.
- It's not quite efficient though, because first, the network is not fully centralized yet; second, there are various technical methods (proxies, RSS readers, mirror sites, etc.) emerging everyday to get around filters.



- I can't compare it with all those countries, but I guess since they have a rather centralized network, owned and run only by the government, especially in China, they can more effectively control it.

**What kind of websites do the authorities target? Judging from the list at Stop censoring us, it seems to be a mix of political, religious and pornographic sites? Is there any clear-cut policy on this? Who is responsible for censorship and "oversight of the media" in Iran? Are the people blocking weblogs the same as the ones shutting down Reformist newspapers?**

- Until recently, it's been only the three member committee who had the authority to judge about the websites. But suddenly since a few months ago, some parts of the judiciary, mainly led by Saeed Mortazavi, has started a brutal crack down on reformist website without them being on the official blacklist. He is not even bound to technical ways of censorship, he has arrested several technicians and journalists related to those websites.

**Do you believe the Internet is having, or will have, a real political impact in Iran? If yes, in what way?**

- A recent poll shows that people have the most trust in Internet as a news source comparing with other media. So while the media are fully controlled by the regime, the mere fact that internet is the only free medium is a very political fact.
- But I don't see any other aspect of the net (as a tool of organizing people, etc.) become politically important in Iran.

**In what ways is the Internet different from other means of circumventing censorship, such as satellite dishes?**

- Internet is interactive, so unlike satellite, it needs an uplink by which data could transfer from the user to the server.

**In the 1990s, many people were extremely optimistic regarding the possibilities for global Free Speech that the Internet seemed to provide. The past few years, some have turned into a more pessimistic note. With heavy censorship in place in China and in some Southeast Asian countries, and increasing efforts even in Middle Eastern and Islamic nations such as Iran, is Free Speech dead or dying in Cyberspace? Is the Internet more a tool for repression and surveillance than for democracy and freedom?**

- Certainly it's far from the early expectations. However, even in regard to China, a partially-censored internet (no government can really censor everything) is better than not having it at all.
- Even in the free countries, imagine if it was not for the internet, how people would ever be able to access real news and information in heavily commercialized media these days.

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